









## ROAD TO ROME



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## FOREWORD

I HAVE endeavoured in this book to give a connected picture of the military operations in the Italian peninsula from the original landing in Sicily to the entry into Rome.

The book aims at being a serious military narrative. At the same time, in order that he—or she—who runs—at the mention of tactics and strategy—may read, I have endeavoured to give the background against which the campaign was fought and a certain amount of my own personal reactions. Either type of reader should therefore be able to leapfrog through the book. I hope that the account of the campaign will prove sufficiently connected for those who want military history and interpretation; and I hope there will be enough atmosphere for those who want to know what the war in the peninsula was like.

I am conscious of the fact that I may appear not to have given sufficient space to the accomplishments of our American allies. This is not due to any lack of appreciation on my part, but solely owing to the fact that a War Correspondent can only be in one place at one time. I was accredited to the British troops in Italy as War Correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, and inevitably spent most of my time with them. Nevertheless, I hope I have not allowed the general picture to become in any way distorted.

This book has been written in the various intervals of time that have been at my disposal since the Italian campaign opened. It has been put together in such diverse places as Sessa Aurunca (which is near Cassino), Casablanca, the ward room of a tank landing-craft, Tunbridge Wells, and finally Brussels.

## FOREWORD

I cannot begin to list the names of all those fighting soldiers whose information, opinions and experiences have been helpful to me. I have frequently felt that a War Correspondent must be a tiresome person either to the fighting soldier or to the Staff officer. But I should like to place it on record that I myself have met with nothing but courtesy and consideration from all ranks at all times. Lieutenant-General Sir John Harding, Chief of Staff to Field-Marshal Alexander, and Major-General Sir Francis De Guingand, Chief of Staff to Field-Marshal Montgomery, have both made most helpful suggestions, particularly in relation to the battle of the Sangro and to the final advance upon Rome. If I mention only one other name, that of Colonel (now Brigadier) E. T. Williams, Chief Intelligence Officer of Eighth Army, it is because I feel that further distinction would be invidious.

The opinions expressed throughout this book are my own. I hold no one else responsible for them.

My gratitude is due to the hospitality afforded me by Commander J. G. Sutton and the officers of LST 319; and to Jean Wright, who typed the larger part of this book to a dictation frequently erratic.

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## DEDICATION

TO

CECILIA

PART ONE  
SICILY



## I. Gathering of the Eagles

IT was a luxury liner, large, spacious and well-appointed ; and the men on board were singing as the ship began to nose out to the open sea from the narrow constriction of the Suez Canal. The songs were mostly sentimental and a fair proportion of them brought back faint, nostalgic flavours of Edwardian music halls. "Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do!" appeared a favourite. It was all intensely homely, but this comfortable liner formed part of an immense invasion fleet, and the men who were singing with a queer mixture of the wistful and the carefree were men picked for the most exacting and critical operation of the whole war up to that date. They were going to invade Europe.

The British force designed for the invasion of Sicily bore the proud name of Eighth Army, and it was commanded by General Montgomery. It included a large part of the old desert army. There was the Fiftieth Division (Major-General Kirkman) who had been in the line almost continuously since the beginning of the previous year. No one had done much to glamourise this Division of North-countrymen, but they had had a fine record of taking the brunt of any amount of hard fighting from Gazala to Mareth, taking pretty heavy losses in the process and coming up again for more.

There was the Fifty-First (Highland) Division (Major-General Wimberley) which had arrived out from England the previous summer and had gone into action at Alamein and had then advanced two thousand miles in the succeeding six months, through the Western Desert of Egypt, through Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and finally Tunisia to Enfidaville.

There were two Divisions new to the Eighth Army: the Fifth Division (Major-General Burney Ficklin), a roving unit which had been in Madagascar, in India and Irak. There was the First Canadian Division (Major-General Simmonds) which, after long months of training in England, had now joined the British forces in the Mediterranean. And finally there was

231 Brigade (Brigadier Urquhart) which, since almost the beginning of the war, had had the vital but far from spectacular rôle of acting as garrison for Malta. It consisted of three regular battalions of West country troops, the Devons, the Dorsets and Hampshires.

Subsequently the Seventy-Eighth Division (Major-General Eveleigh) was to take its place in the line. It had been the earliest unit of the First Army to arrive in North Africa the previous winter and had earned a brilliant reputation in the long and hard-fought hill battles of Tunisia.

And besides this force was the American Seventh Army of General Patton, consisting of the First, Thirty-Fourth and Forty-Fifth U.S. Divisions.

From ports as far apart as Suez and Gibraltar all these Divisions were sailing or about to sail—a forest of spears all pointed in the direction of Sicily, all timed to reach their goal in the hours before dawn on Saturday, July 10.

The invasion followed on a strange, tense interlude of nearly two months' duration which had lasted since the end of the Tunisian campaign; an interlude in which almost everyone had been able to make a pretty good guess in answering the question Where, in relation to the next Act, and the main problem had lain in the question When. For as the weeks passed after the fall of Tunis and the liquidation of the African campaign, a natural impatience had begun to manifest itself in some quarters. The Axis had suffered in Tunisia its most shattering defeat of the war. They had lost their foothold on a Continent and quarter of a million men as well. They had lost a mighty army, their air forces had been shot out of the skies and appeared impotent to interfere with our movements in the Mediterranean, their fleets shrank discreetly back in home waters.

But the good campaigning weeks of early summer were slipping by. Was the time being used to the best advantage? When would the assault on Europe begin?

The answer to this question is, of course, that the assault had already begun. Military theorists divide the offensive into three phases—Approach, Attack, Pursuit. The first of these phases conditions each of the other two. Within a day or two of the close of the Tunisian campaign the approach phase to

the new offensive had begun. It had begun in terms of air bombardment of airfields, ports, railways and roads in Sicily and other parts of the Mediterranean, and pre-eminently of Pantellaria, the fortified island that lies across the narrowest part of the Mediterranean between Cape Bon and Sicily. Through the last days of May and the opening days of June, Pantellaria had been subjected to almost continuous air bombardment. It was, as Air Marshal Conyngham called it, "a test tube experiment of the effects of intense and prolonged bombing." The conditions were unique since the enemy had practically no means of reply. Day after day the Fortresses pounded the island, but it was not until June 11, after ten days of air attack, that it surrendered.

It has been said that this concentration against Pantellaria was a waste of valuable days and weeks, that we should have proceeded with the preparations against Sicily and that once we were firmly established in the latter island Pantellaria would have fallen into our hands like over-ripe fruit. I cannot agree with this argument. The risk of invading Sicily with an as yet unsubdued Pantellaria lying across our line of communications would have been altogether too great. We had to neutralise it as an air and submarine base, and the only such way of doing this was to knock out its defences altogether and to occupy the island.

But this operation reduced the period of summer weather at our disposal. And it made more apparent still the direction which our attack would take.

Meanwhile our forces had been reconcentrating for the coming assault. Battle-weary units were being withdrawn, rested, regrouped and re-equipped. Fresh units were arriving, fresh supply dumps were being built up. All that takes time and transport. To move a single infantry Division by sea takes approximately seven 10,000-ton ships; to transport it by rail needs more than twelve hundred 10-ton trucks; by road some two thousand transport vehicles will be involved and, properly spaced, a Division on the move will cover something like ninety miles of road.

With all this preparation involved it was difficult to suppose that we could obtain strategic surprise. The enemy *must* know,

so it seemed to us, that Sicily was our goal. Axis broadcasts at the time seemed to leave little doubt on this subject. From the first days of June reports from enemy sources continually announced that Anglo-American fleets had put to sea in the Mediterranean. We could not hide our preparations, but we had a wide base for our assault and it was possible to divide our shipping concentrations between numerous ports—Gibraltar, Algiers, Bizerta, Malta, Tripoli, Alexandria, Port Said, Suez. Concentration at a single port would have increased the danger of loss from air attack besides giving indication of our probable goal. And so the troops and the shipping were dispersed along the whole of the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

There had been a curious unevenness about the security measures taken to prevent information about the forthcoming attack leaking out. In Algiers the destination of the invasion fleet was widely known, for in mid-June General Eisenhower summoned the Correspondents who happened to be working in the town at the time and informed them that Anglo-American forces would attack Sicily early in July.

It was a courageous proceeding, and though this frankness in taking the Press into his confidence was most welcome after some experiences War Correspondents had known in other quarters, yet in view of the fact that many of those who were present at this Conference were not themselves destined to cover the invasion but would have weeks of comparative inaction in Algiers, it seemed to be taking a big risk. Newspaper men live by exchanging information; when pressmen get together there is inevitably a good deal of:

“ . . . pronouncing of some doubtful phrase  
As ‘ Well, well, we know ’ or ‘ We could an if we would ; ’  
Or ‘ If we list to speak ’ or ‘ There be, an if they might ; ’  
Or such ambiguous giving out . . . ”

Or to vary Shakespeare with Shaw, Hamlet with Julius Cæsar :

“ When a man knows anything, the chief difficulty is to prevent him from communicating it to all and sundry.”

But I do not know that the confidence was abused or that General Eisenhower ever had occasion to regret taking the Press into his confidence in this matter.

In Cairo things were very different. There the utmost secrecy was preserved so far as the Press were concerned. I respected this decision. It was not vitally important that any pressman should know some weeks in advance where the attack was to be launched. I do not think it was necessary even for those Correspondents who had been selected to take part in the initial landing. There is never any need to multiply the number of persons who know about a forthcoming military operation. Every extra individual who is let into the secret increases the risk of a leakage.

And in any case, any pressman worth his salt ought to have had no difficulty in deducing from the facts at his disposal where the invasion was to occur!

Wisely, I think, nothing was being given away to the Press in Cairo. The three of us who were to accompany the assault troops drew our necessary equipment. (We noted with interest that it contained mosquito netting and a cream to smear over one's face as an additional precaution against malaria. It also included a gasmask.)

On June 25 an Army truck called at my flat in Cairo before dawn. I had been warned overnight and had all my kit in readiness—the 65 lbs. which constituted all that one was permitted to take. We drove off to a destination on the shores of the Red Sea where I was to join 231 Brigade, the unit with whom I was to disembark in Sicily. The departure before dawn gave perhaps a somewhat melodramatic flavour to the general secrecy with which our preparations had been made, but it was a fault on the right side. The conspicuous departure of even a single War Correspondent (and such things were watched in Cairo) would have contributed a further mite of information to the total picture which enemy espionage was endeavouring to construct.

And so I drove off to the Suez Canal through the cool summer dawn.

It was exactly a year since I had arrived back in Cairo from the Western Desert after the loss of Tobruk and the headlong



retreat of the Eighth Army into Egypt. Arrived back three-quarters convinced that the Nile Valley and possibly the whole Middle East as well was lost.

Arrived on the banks of the Suez Canal I had been detailed to join 231 Brigade in camp between Suez and Ismailia. Their training was complete, and everyone was waiting patiently for the orders to embark. We felt that suppressed excitement that play producers know in the few minutes before the curtain goes up on a first night. Everything had been rehearsed, everything was in readiness, every reasonable contingency that could be foreseen had been foreseen. Every stage effect, every piece of "business" had been studied, every character was as nearly word perfect as could be.

We knew everything that could be known in advance. Which means that we knew the first five minutes or less of the drama that would open on the shores of Europe. After that it would take its own course with the violent impingement of fresh characters with very different and opposing rôles on the scene.

We knew everything that was requisite to the opening of the drama except the theatre in which it would be staged, and except the precise night on which the curtain would be raised.

Every day while I waited in the sun-baked camp by the canal, I used to gaze at the aerial photographs of the beaches and the two or three miles of inland country where we were to make our assault. I used to examine the immense relief map—thirty inches to the mile—that was laid out in the officers' mess. The maps and the photographs revealed the tiniest details of terrain; they indicated very clearly where the enemy barbed wire and mines and gun positions were located. Every pillbox, every machine-gun nest, every trench had been carefully photographed and mapped. But there were no place-names of any sort on the maps or the photograph. The small town in the top left-hand corner bore no name. Nor did the bay where we were to land. Nor did the lighthouse or the fishing village on the promontory.

Compass points were indicated. That told me that we should be landing on a coast that faced eastwards. That narrowed our area down to somewhere between Messina and Cape Passaro.

One day we drove into Suez to hear General Montgomery address all the officers of 5 Division, 50 Division and 231 Brigade. Montgomery has this remarkable quality, that whenever you hear him discuss a military operation he gives a crystal clarity and simplicity to the primary factors. He makes his intensely arduous and complex job seem direct and simple—a mere matter of applied mathematics. I never heard it put better than by one of my colleagues, who remarked with humorous appreciation :

“He tells you what he’s going to do, and then the old —— goes and does it.”

So often in the past, from other commanders, we had been told what was intended to be done. But it had not always been done.

To-day Montgomery was speaking in general terms. He told us we were on the eve of an important operation which would have a great influence on the outcome of the war (I think most of us had expected more detailed information in terms of the grand strategy of the war), and he outlined very simply his three governing principles in the conduct of operations :

Never to act until he was ready.

Never to give to any commander or any unit a task beyond their capacity.

Never to tolerate failure.

And he illustrated the working out of these principles in action with reference to Mareth. (“Very interesting battle,” he remarked in the mildly detached reminiscent tone of a history lecturer at Oxford dealing with Wellington’s or Marlborough’s campaigns.)

It was June 29 when we embarked at Suez on the converted luxury liner *Strathnaver*. For nearly a week I lived the life of a becalmed globe-trotter. One ate meals of peace-time proportions in the splendour of the dining saloon, talked with one’s fellow passengers, the officers and men of the Dorset Regiment, read, played chess and finally, as is the fate of all War Correspondents, found myself involved in lecturing to the troops on board.

It was strangely unreal. One didn't feel in the least as though it were the eve of an invasion. One felt rather as though one were on a quarantine ship. For several days we lay off Port Said (we had sailed the length of the Canal and then cast anchor again). One could have tossed a stone ashore from the deck of the ship, but we were not allowed to leave *Strathnaver*. Not, however, that Port Said is a place one would immediately or instinctively select for relaxation.

A morning came (it was July 5) when we sailed from Port Said. No sooner were we at sea than, following a brief rehearsal of our boat stations' positions, the Brigade Major of 231 Brigade summoned all the officers on board to the dining saloon and informed us of the general strategical plan.

We were to invade Sicily, and the objective was "to knock Italy out of the war this year."

A large blackboard with a map of Sicily in chalk was displayed. Arrows marked the directions from which the four and a half British and Canadian Divisions would attack, and the precise functions of our Brigade were explained by the Colonel of the Dorsets.

The main objective of the landing in the south-east of the island was that the four and a half Divisions so landed were to race up northwards along the coast, seizing Syracuse, Catania and finally Messina, while a flankguard fanned out on the left towards the mountains in the centre of the island as a protection against enemy counter-attack. When Messina had fallen it was not anticipated that the resistance of the remainder of the island would cause much trouble.

Meanwhile further to the west along the southern coast of Sicily, American Divisions were to land in the neighbourhood of Gela and seize positions in the centre of the island.

How long would the operation take?

If things went well, perhaps three weeks. If the going proved sticky, it might be anything up to three months.

(In fact it took something between the two—thirty-eight days—but the original estimate was not badly out.)

How powerful were the enemy?

There were estimated to be three Italian Divisions at various

positions along the coast and three more in reserve in the centre of the island. One German Division, the Fifteenth Panzer Grenadier, was already in the island and another (Hermann Goering) had just arrived, but was believed not to be up to full strength.

In addition there were an unspecified number of Italian militia and carabinieri (altogether the Italians had probably a nominal strength of not much less than 200,000 in the island), but both their equipment and their fighting quality were likely to be so inferior, as indeed proved to be the case, that they would not constitute very serious opposition.

The enemy had no great strength of heavy or medium tanks and relied largely on light Italian tanks, M 13 and M 14, and a number of captured French tanks. Moreover, instead of concentrating his forces in the neighbourhood of three or four key positions in readiness for a counterstroke after our landing, it appeared that General Ambrosio, the Italian commander, had spread his Divisions out round the entire coastline, a disposition of his troops which suited us very well.

"D Day"—the code name invariably applied to the day when an operation begins—was July 10. Zero hour for the first troops to land would be at 2.45 a.m. But some three or four hours prior to that parachutists would be dropped in rear of the enemy positions with a view to spreading confusion in general and in particular seizing the aerodromes in the neighbourhood of Cassibile to the west of Syracuse.

Three points struck me as significant at the time.

One was the heavy concentration of Divisions opposite the south-eastern corner of the island. There were four and a half, with a Fifth to follow, besides the American Divisions. One had expected the attack to be made on a wider front.

Secondly, the absence of detailed information about air support was a matter of some concern. It need not have been, for we were well within range of fighter protection from Malta, and in fact our air cover proved perfectly adequate.

Thirdly, there seemed no indication of any diversion occurring. I had expected some demonstration against Sardinia. In fact, there was a very brilliant raid carried out against Crete in which our commando force achieved all its objectives without

loss. It seems to have been a complete surprise for the enemy and was an example of the very nearly perfect diversionary action.

There are few spectacles more powerfully impersonal than that of an invasion fleet at sea. An army moving forward in full war panoply is a sight to catch the imagination and stir the blood. You don't often get the opportunity of seeing this on any considerable scale. I remember one such occasion. It was in the preceding January. Rommel was making his last serious stand before Tripoli, at the Wadi Zemzem. Our guns had pounded his position all through the night. At dawn our tanks of the Seventh Armoured Division had gone forward. For hours tank had engaged tank, firing from hull-down positions. Then superior weight and firepower had told, and just before sunset I had seen our whole force begin to surge forward—tanks, infantry, guns, they were all moving up, one mighty organism in motion. War is, as none know better than I, an organism which functions in terms of pain and destruction and infinite waste—the spectacle of a battlefield after the close of a hard-fought action reminds one of the aftermath of some diabolic bank-holiday. Granted all this, yet the sight of an army in motion, an army surging forward in victory always is and always will be something to stir the blood.

I wish it were not so.

An army in movement, however, remains essentially human and individual in character. But there is a titanic impersonality about a fleet at sea. Day after day in the blue July weather I used to watch from the deck of the *Strathnaver* the steel-grey ships thrusting purposefully forward at an even pace, moving westward between the deep blue of the sea and the paler hue of the sky. There was no suggestion of a swell at sea during those days, there was no cloud in the sky, and the only contrasting hue as one looked upwards was the gay silver of the barrage balloons overhead. And somewhere out of sight, though within easy summons, alert and formidable, was the aircraft protection for this argosy.

And day after day the fleet moved westward like some impersonal elemental force. And in ports along the Mediterranean coast, at Tripoli, at Bizerta, Malta, Algiers, Gibraltar, other

fleets were making ready to put out to sea, perhaps were already at sea.

We looked so formidable a force ourselves, that it was difficult to believe that day after day could pass without any hostile air attack. At any given moment one could see from the deck of *Strathnaver* some two dozen surface craft, cruisers, destroyers, converted merchantmen and liners. And they represented only a part of the fleet that had sailed from a single port.

Meanwhile we continued to eat old-fashioned "English" breakfasts, and three-course lunches and four-course dinners, served by white-coated Indian waiters who moved swiftly and noiselessly from one table to another. It was as startling a contrast as one could wish from the sun-baked, fly-infested camps we had so recently left and from the familiar gastronomic routine of biscuit, bully beef, margarine, cheese and strong over-sweet tea.

There was so much that suggested a peace-time cruise—the weather, the location, the ship itself. Only the predominance of khaki gave a suggestion of a grimmer purpose, a more dubious destination. For it seemed almost uncanny to be going to war under such conditions. My imagination began to people the boat-deck with gaily-clad damsels and anxious scheming mothers. For the ship was positively numinous with ghosts of other summers from beyond the snows.

Yet from the morning that we set sail from Port Said we did indeed experience a "sea change." We were geared now for action. We knew our precise objective and the night when we should attain it. General Orders for the day were posted up in prominent places whilst loud-speakers reiterated more particular instructions at frequent intervals throughout the day. One afternoon the Field Cashiers took charge of the saloon and began to call in our currency, giving us in exchange British Military Authority notes similar to those which we had used in Tripoli. They would be legal tender, the only legal tender, for British troops in Sicily. And every morning we paraded in appropriate kit for "Action Stations" and "Boat Stations." For the life of the entire ship had moved into a more significant, if not yet a more urgent tempo.

We were even issued with textbooks for the invasion. "A Soldier's Guide to Sicily" told us about the people, the history, the geography, the climate, the topography of the country which we were going to invade. When this booklet was distributed among the troops on board someone coined the phrase "the Baedeker Invasion," and the name stuck. But it was a sensible idea to supply the troops with some information about Sicily. Troops cannot fight any the worse for being treated as human beings; they are more likely, other things being equal, to fight better. There was, in fact, a very human atmosphere on board. One has heard the British Army criticised for a lack of camaraderie between officers and men, and unfavourable contrasts are sometimes drawn with Continental Armies in this respect. There is certainly more familiarity between officers and men in the American forces. There may be a far greater sense of social solidarity in the Russian armies; I do not know, for I have never seen the Russians at war. There must at times have been a real paternalism in the attitude of the best of the officers in the old Imperial German army, if one can judge by the attractive picture drawn in Von Bloehm's "Advance from Mons." Greeks, Poles and Yugoslavs achieve a quality of comradeship which we lack. They also quarrel more fiercely and on smaller provocation. But of all the armies I have seen in the field that of the Spanish Republic was unique in the quality of the relationship between the officers and men. It was unique, because never perhaps in history has so large a proportion of a fighting force been impregnated with a belief in the cause for which they fought and a realisation of the issues at stake. Not, at any rate, since the French Revolutionary Armies started their triumphal drive across Europe in '93.

I had seen and honoured the army of the Spanish Republic and of the shames in my life none lies heavier than that I had denied the final proof of my fellowship to the Republic. For I had known what were the issues at stake. And better men than I, whom I had known and worked with among the refugees from Madrid, had done otherwise.

But in those days at sea I found nothing to cause concern in the relations between the officers and their men on board. The officers had been briefed with details of the plan of attack

within a hour or two of our ship putting to sea from Port Said. Each officer present was responsible for seeing that the men under him were adequately informed both of the general picture and of their particular part in it. I think anyone who had doubts about the essential soundness of the relationship would have found it reassuring to wander round the ship during the course of the next day or so. He would have seen little groups squatting on the deck round their officers, would have heard a lucid, genial and good-humoured exposition by those same officers, would have noted the quick, intelligent flow of question and answer and the ready comprehension by the soldier of the task before him and the means at his disposal to carry it out.

The men were ninety-eight per cent. unemotional about the operation. There was a complete absence of any tendency towards romanticising or dramatising the situation. That the Prime Minister or General Montgomery should draw attention to the tremendous significance of the occasion was accepted, was welcome. But from anyone else . . . "Fer Christ's sake don't talk patriotic!" If one talked to the officers about the invasion one found them ready and eager to discuss it with the same intense but dispassionate interest that a keen player might give to a particularly enthralling chess problem. To talk to the men was to discover an attitude which might be summed up in the single phrase, "Glad to be getting on with the job; we've got to clean this show up before we can go home." Nothing more. No animosity and no heroics. The enemy was merely "Jerry" or "The Ities," regarding respectively with grudging admiration and with more than half humorous contempt. To Poles or Greeks or Serbs this lack of animosity must seem puzzling and disquieting, but in fact this very dispassionate quality in the British soldier is his strength. For essentially he thinks in unemotional terms of the job ahead and his approach is always scientific rather than emotional.

Which on the whole is an advantage in the ugly business of killing people whom you have never seen before and whom you might not dislike if you were ever to meet them.



## II.

## Landing

FRIDAY, July 9, was not essentially different from the four or five days that had preceded it. Perhaps the loud-speaker aboard was rather more frequently audible with detailed instructions. There were occasional unexpected spontaneous bursts of singing by the men as the sun dipped down towards the sea ahead of us (a party of Welshmen struck up "Land of My Fathers"). And a good many of us were engaged in putting finishing touches to our landing kit. But we talked and smoked and read and played bridge just as we had done on each of the preceding days. At seven o'clock we sat down to dinner in the palatial saloon (clear soup, vol-au-vent, lamb cutlets, macedoine of fruit). Our next meal would be taken on the Continent of Europe. The white-coated waiters sped noiselessly from table to table, and the diners commented appreciatively upon the vol-au-vent. But within a few hours some of them would be dead.

The plan of attack was as follows :

A shallow bay, with a narrow strip of sandy beach about half a mile in length immediately south of the fishing village of Marzimeni formed our first objective. The Dorsets were to assault the northern end of this, which was given the code name of "Amber beach," by a scramble landing on the rocks below Marzimeni village. Half a mile farther south the Hampshires were to land at the southern end of this crescent of bay and secure the strip of sand known as "Red Beach." Then turning inwards towards one another the leading troops of these two battalions would move along the sand, lifting mines until they established contact with one another. This would enable the third battalion, the Devons, to be landed in the centre. The advance troops of the Brigade would then push inland to a depth of about two miles, destroying or neutralising the coast defence batteries which were located at two or three dominating points north of the town of Pachino—Pachino itself would be the objective of the Division on our left—and were to land to the south of us close to Cape Passaro.

## LANDING

There was one mischance which might have proved fatal to the whole operation. The weather which had been all that could be desired during the past days had taken a slight turn for the worse; the sea, hitherto so calm, began to heave ominously. This rising swell, negligible on board a liner like *Strathnaver*, would mean a good deal if it continued through the night. It would interfere with the meticulous timing of the operation, for the open landing-craft would be tossed about mercilessly if the sea turned stormy; it might be difficult to get them to shore at all, and the troops in them, prostrated by seasickness, would be in no very fit condition to make good their landing should opposition prove resolute and determined.

This worsening of the weather on the afternoon of July 9 was for a time of so serious a nature that I believe a postponement of the whole operation by twenty-four hours was even considered in high quarters. But quite obviously only in the last resort would such a postponement have been undertaken. The fleets were at sea, abundantly conspicuous to any reconnaissance plane that chose to fly over the southern approaches to Sicily. Any delay now must throw the entire plan out of gear and involve the whole mighty invasion fleet marking time at sea under peril of attacks by enemy aircraft and submarines.

The times of disembarkation of the various parts of the Brigade had been fixed in a number of "Serials." Serials ranged from one to about a hundred and twenty. Serials one to twenty-seven comprised the assault troops. After that came the supporting forces, the Staff and all the various non-combatant elements that make up a force in the field. Upon inquiry I found myself relegated to serial seventy-seven with the prospect of leaving the ship at about nine o'clock on the following morning. By that time it was to be assumed that our assault troops would have gone "quite some distance" and the whole landing operation, unless it were to prove a ghastly and bloody failure, would long have been completed.

I had no desire to learn about the landing from the wireless operator on board *Strathnaver*. One does not, as a rule, get the chance to participate in an assault landing very frequently in

one's life, and I certainly did not want to miss this one. Fortunately I had made friends with the Colonel of the Dorsets and I persuaded him to "yank" my serial number up from seventy-seven to eighteen. This would enable me to accompany the wave which went in before daylight as soon as signals from the landing parties on the flanks had announced that the entire beach from "Red" to "Amber" had been cleared. (I came to the conclusion many days later that I should have done better to have stayed on board all night and made sure of getting some sort of message back as early as possible, but I thought then—as I think now—that it is the job of a War Correspondent to see for himself whenever it is humanly possible rather than to depend on second-hand accounts. There has been far too much headline news of this war written several hundred miles from the scene of action.)

Besides, it would be much more interesting to land with, at any rate, the second wave of assault troops.

We were due to assemble on one of the lower decks at 11.15 that night. Having drunk my after-dinner coffee and played a game of chess with a solemn ginger-haired lieutenant in the Dorsets I found that there was still an hour or so to spare, so I went and lay down in my cabin. I was rather tired but too excited to do more than doze intermittently. I knew that by all the logic of the thing I ought to be feeling frightened. In fact I felt nothing of the sort, only the tingling sense of excitement that one knows just before the curtain goes up on a new play which you have every reason to believe you are going to enjoy.

This is not bravado, because I am afraid of an enormous quantity of things, more particularly of heights and depths. But I do think it important to record because I am convinced that it represented the basic reaction of more than nine-tenths of the men on board that night. The prospect of action after inaction is stimulating; the fact that you know the details of that action to have been carefully and elaborately planned is reassuring; and to know that the attention of the world is focused upon your movements during the next few hours is the most stirring experience that I know.

Just before eleven I stopped pretending to doze, and began

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to dress myself for my part. It had not been altogether easy to fix upon the ideal costume for invading Europe. I knew that the first phase in an open landing-craft at midnight with a high sea running would be a chilly experience, but that subsequently I must prepare to be roasted under the Sicilian sun. Finally I compromised with a bush-shirt, khaki slacks and a pullover. But a good deal more equipment is involved when one is engaged upon an assault landing. There was the very necessary "Mae West" lifebelt to be donned, the scarcely less necessary water-bottle, binoculars and steel helmet. There was the gas mask; with this last I could well have dispensed but orders were adamant upon this point. And finally there was the haversack containing two days' rations, washing and shaving kit. To these it was necessary to add a portable typewriter—for I could not afford even for a few hours to be separated from that—and enough copy paper to have written "War and Peace" and "Gone With the Wind." And finally, lest there should be *longueurs* in the process of conquering Europe, Fanny Burney's "Evelina" coquetted her way into this austere assembly. By the time I was fully clad I began to feel the closest resemblance to a Christmas tree.

I stumbled along to Deck E. Here there were scores of men waiting equipped very much as I was except for the significant difference that while I carried a typewriter they had rifles and tommy-guns and stretchers. Mugs of hot tea were passed round. And as we stood around in groups waiting for the signal to proceed to the boat-deck I learned to love my fellow-countrymen.

For it was an abrupt experience as is the nature of love. One must adopt the personal approach in describing the essential quality of an experience of this nature, for it is the personal angle that is all-important. I do not react easily to collective emotions as I am cast in that contra-suggestive mould that tends to oscillate towards the minority view and the minority sensation. But in the steamy fetid heat of Deck E of the *Strathnaver* around midnight of July 9 I experienced something in the nature of a special revelation. I don't think I can get nearer to it than to say that I felt an extreme sense of humility in the presence of these men and a degree of identity with them. Just

as the nearest, I suppose, that one can hope to attain towards the "good life" is the achievement of a sense of identity with whatever force one calls God, so there was an extraordinary sense of release, emotional release in one's sense of identity with these brave men. Every moment seemed charged with an ultimate significance in the scheme of things. It was the significance that one recognises in great art, most notably perhaps in such a play as "Antony and Cleopatra" where single and apparently even banal sentences towards the close of that tremendous play seem to become endowed with a cosmic significance.

And yet on the factual plane it was all very simple. We stood shuffling in the steamy heat of Deck E, awaiting the signal. If I had to select a simile I should say that I was reminded of a particularly good-tempered crowd awaiting the beginning of a big football match. There was the same basic good humour, the same authentically English note that descends from Fielding through Dickens to the present day.

Someone had picked up a discarded steel helmet.

"Anyone want a tin hat?" came the query above the subdued hum of talk.

"Yus! Mussolini!" came the prompt reply amid a burst of laughter.

It was a quarter of an hour before midnight and we began to form up as well as the cramped conditions would permit and move off up the companion way in single file in the direction of the boat-deck. From somewhere below, came the voice of another humorist:

"Nah then, Bert, remember what yer muvver told you, an' don't get yer feet wet!"

And I recognised with delight the authentic Bairnsfather touch.

At the top of the companion way they gave us a mugful of rum each as we filed past. It scalded the throat and warmed the inside, and within a very few minutes we were going to need that additional warmth.

It was an eerie moment as we climbed silently through the darkness into our appointed places in the landing-craft. The night was clear and starry, and a reddish half-moon was tilting

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downwards towards the sea. I watched it fascinated until it dipped completely out of sight. A moment or two later our boat began to be lowered towards the surface of the sea.

We were lying perhaps some four miles out from the shore at this time. By the light of the stars the hulls of adjacent landing-craft were clearly visible, and beyond them the more ponderous bulk of the warships and transports which had brought this army unimpeded and practically without loss to the shores of Sicily. Looking over towards the island I could see a display of fireworks on a scale I could not recall on any other occasion in the war. Our airmen seemed to be dropping a continuous succession of flares over Syracuse. The bright sudden flare of a bomb burst and the crackerlike sparks from the tracer bullets which the enemy's anti-aircraft batteries were firing formed a variant to the spectacle. Once the flares seemed to form themselves into a vast menacing note of interrogation. It seemed an omen entirely appropriate to the immense issues at stake.

Occasionally the Italian searchlights sent a long beam through the darkness sweeping hither and thither, rather vaguely it seemed, and there was a certain amount of flak. Two or three times green lights appeared momentarily on the distant coastline. I wondered what they signified for it was too soon for our advance parties to have made contact or even to have landed. Possibly it was the outward and visible evidence of the impact of the parachutists. Anyhow, a celestial hullabaloo was going on. It was a gaudy, strident overture to the drama that was just about to open, but none of us felt the worse for the indication that our aircraft were so much on the spot.

I had vaguely supposed that the moment our landing-craft touched the sea we should go all out for the shore just as fast as we could. About four miles of water had to be covered, and I presumed that we should endeavour to get the maximum number of troops on land before daylight. After that I envisaged a situation not unlike that which had occurred at the Gallipoli beaches with the attacking troops clinging precariously to a square mile or two of coastline while the hidden machine-gunners of the defenders blazed away at anything moving on or near the beaches. Vaguely I had supposed that one would

lie burrowed into the sand until night, taking furtive pulls at one's water-bottle under a blazing merciless sun. Then with nightfall would come a further advance which would take us forward from the beaches at any rate some little distance inland.

That was how I had pictured "D Day" in my imagination. It was not a very good forecast.

We did not sail at once for the shore. Instead we manœuvred round in a semi-circle until we had got into position in line with the other landing-craft. I suppose this must have occupied about twenty minutes, but it was difficult to calculate time. We were all in line so that despite the tossing sea you could almost have drawn a tape straight along the bows from one landing-craft to another.

Suddenly there was a low cry from the man next to me :

"They're off!"

And as far as one could see through the moonless darkness the whole line of landing-craft, each containing some eighteen to twenty fully equipped men, began to pitch forwards through the restless sea.

It had seemed from the deck of our liner that the mildly turbulent sea that had been running in the afternoon had calmed down almost to stillness. To us in the open boat it became a brawling and vigorous enemy. The waves were breaking over our bows and within a very few minutes every man in the boat was soaked to the skin. We cleft and tossed our way on through the waves. It was at some such stage of the proceedings as this that I had expected to be visited by symptoms of acute fear. But it just didn't happen. I was too busy being chilled and wet and uncomfortable and fighting against the rising queasiness of sea-sickness to have time to think about anything else. And that went, I imagine, for every man in the landing-crafts that night. For fear is essentially the child of ease and comfort, and the conditions requisite to it didn't happen to exist just then.

And all the time the boats were moving stealthily in towards the shore, and still no hostile battery barked defiance at us from the coast, no E-boat slipped in among us to disturb the evenness of our approach. Incredibly, it seemed that we had achieved local surprise, in spite of the weight and direction of our air

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bombardments and the obviously inviting nature of south-eastern Sicily. One did not know of the indiscretion by which the B.B.C. had announced that an Allied Fleet was at sea in the general direction of western Sicily and Sardinia.

To the north Syracuse and its neighbourhood appeared to be experiencing a non-stop raid, while to the south towards Cape Passaro the big naval guns from our ships were opening up, but from the immediate frontal of our brigade the same uncanny stillness prevailed. The possibility of an ambush passed across my mind, but I speedily dismissed it after a glance at my watch which showed me that it was not yet 2.45 which was zero hour for the first of our troops to land.

We drew nearer to the shore. Suddenly the man next to me exclaimed abruptly, "You can almost *smell* land." And he was right. The night breeze seemed tinged with a quality of earthiness—European earth. Since the evacuation of Greece in April, 1941, I had only spent a few hours on the mainland of the Continent—at Gibraltar seven weeks earlier—and I thrilled to the thought of Europe.

It was our rôle to lie some five hundred yards offshore until the success signal, four green flares in succession, went up on the beach ahead of us. That period was probably the tensest time of the whole dramatic night. Zero hour arrived. Ten minutes more passed and still the shore remained shrouded in complete silence. At the time I imagined that it implied that our landings had miraculously achieved complete surprise. In fact, though I did not know it at the time, our landing parties were some half an hour or so behind their scheduled time, owing to the stormy sea.

There was a sharp burst of small arms here from the neighbourhood of the southern beach. It ended as abruptly as it had begun. That seemed a good omen. It suggested that enemy resistance had been rapidly overwhelmed. But one could not know. One could only visualise the patrols working their way cautiously along the beach, prodding for mines with bayonets as they went.

Another pause. Then sporadic outbursts of fire from every part of the coastline in front of us and from the hinterland. It was impossible to draw any deductions from them or gather



which way the action was developing. These bursts of small arms fire continued at intervals for perhaps three-quarters of an hour. The sky was already paling towards the summer dawn, and anxious eyes were beginning to be cast eastwards in the direction of sunrise for it would not be pleasant to be caught in an open landing-craft a mere quarter of a mile offshore in full view of the enemy with the beaches ahead of us as yet.

"If the signal doesn't come in another half-hour or so I'm afraid we're for it," someone remarked.

It was four o'clock.

Perhaps twenty minutes elapsed, perhaps less. And then a green light leaped into the air ahead of us. It was followed by another and then a third and a fourth. None too soon the success signal had come. The beaches were clear.

I imagined that we should immediately make straight for the beach in a sort of nautical cavalry charge. But we had still to wait until the final signal which told that lanes had been made through the enemy minefields. Then our craft started for the shore and, soaked and jubilant, we watched the outline of the land draw near. The sea was smooth now beneath us in the partially landlocked bay, and we glided peacefully in.

The boat struck shore.

One by one we clambered, numbed and stiff, to our feet and staggered, clad in our encumbering "Christmas trees," along the length of the landing-craft. I felt one foot splash in shallow water and then the other struck soft sand, three thousand years of history rushed towards me, and I stood again in Europe.

It was just after half-past five and not yet quite light when I stepped unsteadily into Europe. Looking left and right I saw numbers of other landing-craft drawn up along the shore. I was last off the boat and already the fellow occupants of my boat were disappearing ghostlike shadows in the morning mist. While the advance combat troops were already pushing ahead into the interior, the supporting units were promptly digging provisional shelter trenches on the beach itself with the speed born of long and systematic training.

"Follow the white tape!" exclaimed someone at my side, and I saw that already two parallel tapes were stretched across

the beach marking where a path had been cleared of anti-personnel mines and wire, and through the greying, thinning darkness I lurched forward between the tapes, following my platoon. Fifty paces (how pigmy everything seemed! That was the result of having studied such very large scale maps of this beach for so many days), fifty paces brought me to a dusty secondary road. Remembering the map I swung left. Three empty-looking stone houses stood on the right of the road (I was consciously memorising every detail and feature of the landscape) and under the shadow of their walls crouched six or seven steel-helmeted figures, with fixed bayonets.

"Desert Rat!"

I experienced the familiar fraction of a second's hesitation when one wonders whether one has forgotten the countersign.

"Kill the Italians!" I exclaimed, and stumbled on up the lane.

The road swung right, and I could see the figures of my platoon moving forward across the fields in extended order. There were "Saltpans" marked on the map at about this point, but they were dry enough at this time of year. I skipped over a narrow shallow ditch and forgetting the possibility of further mines cut across the field diagonally to join the platoon.

It gave one an unexpected and refreshing sense of solidarity to rejoin them. To my own surprise I found myself thrilling at forming a part of a moving organism, an army advancing into hostile territory. To see men spaced out to left and right and moving surely forward across the fields (no one seemed greatly concerned about the possibility of mines) and to move forward with them is unaccountably stimulating. Perhaps the stimulation was all the greater because there was not the slightest evidence of any opposition. It might have been a peace-time manoeuvre at that moment.

About three-quarters of a mile inland we reached a lane where there was a farm and cottages. One might reasonably have anticipated an ambush here, but the farm was quite deserted. I stopped to get my bearings, jot down a few notes and generally "organise" myself.

It seemed a miracle. I had never imagined, despite the justified official optimism, that a landing on a section of the

enemy's coastline which had been so patently in the forefront of the battle since the fall of Tunis would be so feebly opposed, would meet with such startling and instantaneous success. I had been impressed by the elaborate planning, not least by the meticulous knowledge of terrain and defences of south-eastern Sicily in the possession of our command as the result of air reconnaissance, but the words "landing-beaches" had always connoted to me the bare exposed fringes of the Gallipoli Peninsula and all that is connected with that heroic but fruitless enterprise. Despite the paucity of enemy defences as revealed in aerial photographs, I had visualised us disembarking on to heavily wired beaches under a hail of fire from hitherto concealed and unsuspected machine-gun positions. I had imagined us burrowing down into the sand for protection. That had been my mental picture. Yet here was I within quarter of an hour of landing in Europe seated in a leafy lane feeling mildly discomfited because I was dirty and unshaven, and because I was at once chilled and sweaty. It seemed too ridiculously prosaic.

Europe re-entered seemed singularly peaceful and somnolent. I looked around at the two or three empty stone houses, the stretch of white dusty lane, some shallow pools and a field of stubble. It was, thank God, a very European *paysage*, and with the sun not yet up to give it the hard Mediterranean glitter there was a softness of outline positively and nostalgically English. It seemed unnatural that this landscape should sleep so peacefully on this tremendous morning. I felt that every house should have been a pillbox, every hedge should have concealed a machine-gun nest or an anti-tank gun. But our men moving forward crouchingly with fixed bayonets were passing on circumspectly yet swiftly towards their objectives.

Rose Macaulay once edited a volume entitled "The Minor Pleasures of Life." That morning I felt in a position to contribute an entirely fresh, if minor, pleasure to her list, and that is the pleasure of being ashore in an invasion before even battalion headquarters have arrived, let alone the headquarters of larger units. Headquarters represent "Authority," and for the moment there is no Authority. The enemy have gone, and there will be a blessed hour or so before one's own

Authority arrives. I felt strangely free to roam precisely where I would in or out of the battle. And the thought of life momentarily freed from Authority is curiously satisfying.

At the moment however I felt the need for a wash. I went up to one of the cottages and rapped sharply on the door. An elderly man, fully dressed, with an elderly wife just behind him, opened the door and promptly popped up his hands at the sight of me or of my revolver. I asked for some water. They produced a tiny saucepanful and I performed superficial ablutions with this, astonished to discover how dirty I was. At my side a British officer was seated on the ground, carefully changing his sea-stained shirt and trousers (some of his immediate neighbours in his landing-craft had suffered all too evidently from *mal-de-mer*) for a fresh pair which he produced like a conjuror from his haversack. That is the sort of startlingly improbable incident to which one becomes accustomed on the field of battle. It sounds so wildly fictional, but it does actually occur.

Meanwhile there was still the "freedom of Sicily" to be enjoyed. The thrill of walking about in European fields again proved a genuine one, and anticipation had not outrun reality. I wandered off to the right. A bare quarter-mile brought me to a farm where already an Advanced Dressing Station had been set up. I noted with satisfaction that there was no evidence of any casualties as yet. Later I learned that there had been some losses at the original landing, but very few. One of the battalions reported only one man killed and six wounded in the course of the entire day.

Resistance, in fact, had been almost negligible. Further north the Fiftieth and the Fifth Divisions had encountered more opposition. The landing-craft had been rather late off the mark owing to the heavy seas, and one or two of the beaches had come under enemy shellfire. On our left, however, the Highland Division and the First Canadian Division had met with virtually no opposition, and by seven-thirty in the morning work was already in progress on Pachino aerodrome which had been very thoroughly ploughed up by the enemy. Only in the American area in the neighbourhood of Gela was opposition really serious where there were Germans present among the defenders, and they counter-attacked with tanks, penetrating

almost to the beaches. But before dark the Americans succeeded in establishing themselves, and in the subsequent days the acute pressure of the Eighth Army towards Catania drew off the German forces to defend the more vital eastern coast of the island.

But here at Marzimeni resistance had been little more than "token." Exploring to the left I reached a road-block where a concrete pillbox and a six-foot wall built half-way across the road had simply been abandoned. The only person in the neighbourhood was an Italian civilian, an employé at the local tobacco factory. He sat on a large stone smoking a cigarette and looking rather like George Robey. This sector had been defended, it appeared, by a battalion of Coastal Defence troops (the equivalent, I presumed, of the British Home Guard), some carabinieri and police. The carabinieri had at least fired a few shots before withdrawing, but as for the Fascist police "the moment they heard the sound of machine-gun fire they mounted on horses and galloped away at full speed."

I liked the touch about the horses.

I told George Robey that Fascism was "*finito*" and so was Mussolini. He beamed from ear to ear. "*Contentissimo!*" he exclaimed, and beamed from ear to ear again. Then he indicated in pantomime that his cigarette was finished, and so I gave him another.

"*Contentissimo!*" he repeated. The cigarette meant as much to him, or as little, as the entire structure of Fascism. Or it appeared to be so.

And that, roughly speaking, was a pretty fair sample of the Sicilian reaction to our invasion and to the fall of Mussolini a fortnight later.

I wandered back towards the sea. Already our support troops, tanks and guns were coming ashore with the steady rhythm that spoke of weeks of careful planning. As I walked back along the dusty road in the strengthening sunlight, the first of our tanks passed me. What a solidly comforting thing a tank, especially if it be a Sherman, is to the man on foot. I can well understand the argument that the presence of a few tanks in action again and again justifies itself even if the country is not really suitable for their employment. It justifies itself

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because of the fillip which it gives to the infantry. The feeling that "The tanks are there!" serves as an assurance to the men on the ground that they will not be speedily or easily overrun. And as our Shermans ground their way up the lane I felt that our landing could really be regarded as established.

Marzimeni village was completely deserted. I suppose its population had taken to the fields, though I couldn't see any sign of them there. One old man peered cautiously out of a doorway, and he was the only living being I saw. There were two corpses of Italian soldiers in the street. One of them I traced by a trail of blood as far as the church door where he lay dead, shot in the neck.

Meanwhile our troops were pushing on inland. I brewed up some tea under the shelter of the wall of a wine store, using a little spirit stove that I had packed with my emergency rations. Then I started off on foot to catch up with our forward troops who were now pushing deep inland to the north of Pachino. On the face of it the terrain looked to afford plenty of opportunities for a determined resistance. The ground sloped upwards in a series of gentle undulations, each of which provided natural hull-down positions for tanks. The value of this had obviously not passed unnoticed by the Italian military authorities who had planned the defences of the island two years earlier. Along two of these ridges they had constructed a series of pillboxes which commanded a splendid field of fire over the harbour and might well have rendered the storming of our beaches as bloody a task as was the conquest of the Gallipoli beaches in 1915. The pillboxes were very strongly constructed, and most of them had underground chambers stored with ammunition. But though the ammunition was there, the guns were not. Only about half the pillboxes were gunned. Those on the forward ridge were mounted with guns of a calibre something less than our 25 pounders; in the main position were one or two much heavier weapons, of about six-inch calibre. But in no case did I see any of more recent than 1918 manufacture, and one at least dated as far back as 1907!

As for the garrisons of these pillboxes, they had simply melted away. Our troops didn't even have to fight to occupy them; there was no one there at all. A single gun from a

strongpoint a couple of miles back kept up a steady fire. Ranging on the harbour, it succeeded in sinking one small tanker before the naval guns from one of the warships lying out to sea were turned on it and silenced it. And somewhere among the trees, high up on the pillbox ridge, a solitary sniper was taking pot shots at our infantry. Report said that he had climbed up a tree, which struck me as ingenious but improbable. I saw two or three of our men being detailed off to stalk him and round him up.

He was a brave man and I found myself hoping, illogically, sentimentally, that he would succeed in getting away.

Down the lane came numbers of green-uniformed Italian soldiers, about two hundred of them in two or three separate batches. They weren't even guarded; they were just marching in to surrender with their hands up. Some of them were laughing and joking. They were quite ready to talk and explain away their defeat in terms of the poor quality of their equipment (I had heard this excuse given often before by Italian prisoners in the desert). "What do you expect? Italy is a poor country; Britain and America are rich. When do you suppose that the war will end?"

That was how they reacted. Sometimes they gave themselves up to a single British soldier, sometimes they didn't even wait for that but simply walked down the road to find someone to whom they could surrender. It was rather like the last days of Tunisia, when I used to grow quite weary of jerking my thumb back over my shoulder to indicate to would-be prisoners that, although I was personally too busy to make them captive, if they continued down the road they would presently find someone who would take charge of them.

The only real scrap that day was away on our northern flank where a handful of Italian tanks displayed more courage than discretion in endeavouring with the fire of their 37 mm. guns to hold up the advance of our Shermans with their 75's and their much stronger defensive armour. I stood in the lane close to one of our tanks watching this unequal combat for a time. One after another the enemy tanks were hit and silenced. By noon half a dozen of them had been knocked out, one from a direct hit at three-quarters of a mile range. After that I left.

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It was too much like watching sitting pheasants being rounded up.

It was already noon, and British ships were lying at anchor in Marzimeni with a dignified insouciance which suggested Spithead or Gibraltar in peace-time rather than a hostile coast on "D Day" of the invasion of Europe. And the steady ferrying of troops, guns, tanks and supplies ashore went on all through the day. It was not until the afternoon that German aircraft began to appear over the harbour, and then it was only a series of perfunctory hit and run raids. I saw no damage done.

And if that spectacle of unhampered, unhurried disembarkation was an astonishing and refreshing picture, not less reassuring was the view that met my eyes as I looked inland. I saw British officers moving from one unit headquarters to another riding on sequestered bicycles, horses, donkeys; British soldiers strolling peacefully up the country lanes rich with their summer foliage. Only the occasional crack of a sniper's bullet (was it the same sniper, and had they not got him yet?) and the still more rare whine of an occasional shell overhead disturbed the profound midsummer calm. And this in territory which enemy proclamations had called high heaven to witness would be defended to the last, cost what it might.

But looking around at the peaceful fields between Pachino and Marzimeni I saw British soldiers going about their business with the sort of prosaic gentleness which is so characteristic of them where civilians are concerned. I saw them drawing water at the well of a little cottage above Marzimeni (I shall return on a Sentimental Journey to that cottage one of these days to indulge the nostalgic pleasure of reliving some at least of the emotions of that tremendous day). I saw them paying out Amgot *lire* for tomatoes and eggs at exactly the rate demanded by the cottager. They had not been on shore above twelve hours yet. But I knew that they had come to stay, and I knew that whatever might happen elsewhere in Sicily or in Italy here it was all over.

That first day Eighth Army had achieved—and more than achieved—its objectives. These were: First, to make good its landings between Syracuse and Pozzallo; and then to capture the airfield of Pachino and the port of Syracuse. The



taking of the former place would ensure the possession of at least one fighter landing-ground for close air protection of our troops, while the latter would provide the means of obtaining a regular port of supply where our heavier ships could berth and be unloaded.

Pachino was captured practically without resistance. The first troops were ashore by 4 a.m.; by 7.30 engineers were already at work on the landing-ground; by 12.45 the first strip was reported ready for use, and the town itself was cleared by the Highland Division by 1.30. About a thousand prisoners were taken by the Thirtieth Corps alone in the course of the day.

On the right Thirteenth Corps had at first found progress rather more difficult owing to delays in getting the landing-craft ashore, and there was some counter-fire from enemy coastal batteries and from guns inland. But on the left Fiftieth Division reached the outskirts of Noto and entered Avola, while on the right Fifth Division in their first day of action in the Mediterranean area, captured Cassibile before ten in the morning.

Only the airborne operation had not gone as planned. Only twelve of nearly one hundred and fifty gliders were actually landed in the neighbourhood of their objective. Forty-seven fell into the sea and seventy-five more dropped their passengers too far from their objectives to enable them to take any effective part in the day's operations. There were two causes for this, the one unavoidable, the other indicating the single weakness of the training that had prepared the way for the invasion.

The unavoidable factor was the high wind which sprang up in the afternoon and evening of July 9, which could not reasonably have been anticipated at the height of a Mediterranean summer. The other factor, which was again apparent four nights later at the time of the *Prima Sole* operation, was the evidence that the majority of the pilots of the towing craft were insufficiently trained and lacking in air experience. This one aspect of the planning appeared to have received something less than the careful attention devoted to the remainder. Even so, however, the operation was very far from fruitless. Most of those who were dropped wide of the mark contributed to the general confusion among the Italian defenders by attacking

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every pillbox and defence position that they found. Moreover eight officers and sixty-five men succeeded in reaching the Ponte Grande, the bridge across the Anapo, and holding it for eighteen hours. Even when forced from the bridge itself they succeeded in preventing its destruction by removing the demolition charges with the result that the vanguard of Fifth Division were able to make contact with them and pass straight on into Syracuse, which was occupied that night, with its port installations virtually undamaged.

The landing had been made good, we held a sixty-mile stretch of coast, and the enemy, so far from counter-attacking, had not even begun to concentrate for resistance. An indiscretion on the part of the B.B.C. had helped to convince the enemy that our major attack was to be launched against the western end of the island. As a result the enemy found themselves, when our attack was launched, with the bulk of their forces, German and Italian, partly in the west, partly straddled across the centre, and faced by the necessity of a rapid reconcentration in the area of the Catania plain before they could develop any counter-attack. And during these vital three days, July 11-13, not only was Montgomery's Eighth Army able to make rapid gains, but the relaxation of pressure against the Americans permitted the Seventh Army of General Patton to start a movement forward which enabled them first to push through to Palermo by July 22 and then to move rapidly along the north coast of the island without meeting with any further very serious resistance. That was the fruit of the Allied deception and the Axis miscalculation.

Sunday, July 11, goes down in my memory as the "Garibaldian day." It had two characteristics that linked it with that epic. In the first case one was conscious all day of the astonishing speed of the advance; as our troops went forward opposition seemed simply to melt away; secondly, I saw, for the first time, our men being received as liberators by the population of an allegedly hostile country. And that was stimulating and profoundly stirring. Already, within thirty-six hours of our original landing, it was pretty clear that not only had the people no heart in the war, but they welcomed the arrival of British

and American forces. We announced that we came as liberators, and it was as liberators that they received us. They had had all they wanted of Mussolini's war.

I spent the first night ashore in an abandoned cottage in the fields above Marzimeni, making myself a meal of tomatoes and eggs, bought from the neighbouring cottage to supplement the rations which I had brought from the ship. Then I lay down to sleep just as I was in my clothes on the stone floor with my head on a haversack, for my bed-roll and blankets and all the rest of my kit had not yet come ashore.

Brigade Headquarters had moved on before dawn up the road in the direction of Noto. Rumour had it that Noto had been abandoned by the enemy last night, and some enterprising spirits, including the Amgot Governor-designate of the town, had gone ahead to try to get in before dark. But whether the town was or was not clear of the enemy, the road did not yet appear to be quite free and the entry had had to be delayed.

An officer returned from the beach with such kit as had been landed, and I succeeded in extracting mine. I also managed to obtain a half-share in a box of compo. rations. During these first two or three days of the campaign the problem of supplying oneself was something of a case of catch-as-catch-can for individuals working, as a War Correspondent does, in the blue without any attachment to particular units. But it very soon sorted itself out. Having hitch-hiked all over Republican Spain during the Civil War, I had learned the technique of eating whenever an opportunity for a meal presented itself, because you never knew when the next chance might occur. And so I welcomed that half-share in the ration box which provided me with a week's supply of food. But I never had occasion to dip deeply into it, and in fact broke all sorts of army regulations by giving most of the contents away to needy-looking civilians.

A lorry was going northward in the direction of Noto, and I hopped on with my kit. It was a wonderful Sunday morning drive. The enemy had simply faced away. What was more, he had left negative evidence that he had no serious intention of fighting. Not only had his gun positions been abandoned, as I had noted on the previous day, but no attempt had been made to destroy the numerous bridges and culverts along the

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twenty-mile stretch of road towards Noto. Remembering the thorough and methodical demolitions which had characterised the long retreat from Alamein during the preceding winter, I knew that there was evidence that it was not the power but the will to defend the island that was lacking to the Italians.

If the enemy garrison had been in our pay they could scarcely have done more to facilitate our progress. The charges must have been in position to demolish the numerous bridges, but they were never detonated; the guns and ammunition were ready in the pre-selected sites, but there were no gunners; and finally the wooden trestles covered with barbed wire, which could have been got into position in a minute or two, stood innocuously at the side of the road.

And so the British Army was advancing just as fast as it was able—searching for the enemy. As always in an invasion—it was exactly the same two months later in Italy—the landing assault troops were in advance of the bulk of their transport. That is unavoidable, for guns and tanks and petrol and ammunition receive a higher priority than transport vehicles. As a result the advance that morning presented a strange and sometimes archaic appearance. Much of the lighter kit went on donkey-carts, some of it in wheelbarrows. There were men riding bicycles, donkeys, horses even. But apart from these few fortunate exceptions, and apart from those of us who had jumped lorries, the infantry simply foot-slogged it along the fifteen miles of road to Noto. Infantry marching mile after mile along perfectly good motor roads was a sight I had scarcely seen since the days of the Greek campaign; it looked at first as startlingly unnatural, as anachronistic a spectacle in modern war as if one had suddenly seen a squadron of centaurs proceeding in stately gallop down the road or had met a mermaid in a municipal swimming-bath.

Noto is a pleasant little town with one long tree-lined avenue bisecting it from one end to another. Our lorry passed the first of the marching infantry on the hill that leads up to the town and we drove straight in. I don't remember that any of us enquired whether the town had been actually cleared. The fact that the infantry were approaching in so prosaic a manner, in "Agmen" as distinct from "Acies", seemed to satisfy us

all. As we drove slowly up the central avenue the population thinly lining the pavement on either side started to clap; and the ripple of clapping followed us the entire length of the town. It was an interesting demonstration; spontaneous enough, and yet with an oddly dutiful quality. People don't clap when they are feeling entirely unrestrained and hilarious; they cheer. We didn't hear a cheer or even a single audible comment. They just stood and clapped. It was the first town of any importance to be occupied, and the people of Sicily had no reliable precedent as a guide to our behaviour, apart from wild garbled stories about black Australians in Libya. And so there was perhaps a slightly apprehensive note in the clapping. It didn't last long.

There had been very few Germans in this part of Sicily at any time, and what the people were applauding was not the liberation from the Germans, who were little more than a name to them, but liberation from Fascism which had a much more real impact on their lives. Impact rather than appeal, for the Fascist system had never struck deep roots in the island. Sicily had always been the discontented Cinderella of Mussolini's empire, and had probably received fewer concrete benefits from it than had any other part of the kingdom. The usual Fascist slogans, Mussolini's cheap cracker mottoes, decorated the walls of the houses, and I believe that they really do satisfy some childlike streak in the Italian mentality, but already on that Sunday morning it was clear that Fascism was as dead in Sicily as had been the Bourbon régime when Garibaldi marched through the island in 1860.

Half-way along the pleasant avenue of Noto the Town Hall and the Cathedral face one another across the street, two dignified if slightly theatrical baroque façades giving a nicely symmetrical balance to the architectural scheme of the town. On the steps of the former building we gathered—the Amgot Governor, the Mayor, two or three British officers and myself. No other British troops had yet arrived.

The more prominent citizens established themselves on the steps immediately below us, their position being determined apparently by the degree of civic importance they enjoyed in Noto, while the mass of the population covered the steps up to the Cathedral opposite.

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The Mayor began to read General Eisenhower's proclamation.

I gazed across at the massed, colourful throng over the road, the fine baroque façade behind and above them, and the deep blue of the Mediterranean summer sky beyond. It looked the perfect backcloth for musical comedy. It only required a gaily-clad shepherdess to come tripping down the steps with the crowd parting to left and right in front of her, and the Mayor would, I felt convinced, have burst into song.

Apparently the same thoughts were in the mind of the Military Governor, Major Elwes.

"Pure Drury Lane!" he whispered in my ear.

I agreed.

For it was all too fantastically unreal. I had landed to follow a war and here, on the second day of the landing, I was "assisting," in the French sense of the word, at this delicious charade. I began mentally to sketch out the scenario for a musical comedy; "Nellie from Noto" sounded a good title.

I was recalled to the business in hand by a burst of applause. The Mayor was announcing that the Allied forces had landed in Sicily not because of any quarrel with the Italian people, but to destroy the domination of Germany in Europe and to take all necessary measures to eliminate Fascism.

The people cheered.

He announced the restoration of freedom of speech and writing, and the release of political prisoners, and there was a mighty burst of applause. That was spontaneous enough, and old and tired as these slogans are I found that they still had power to thrill me; and I knew that these people would not again, would never again be stirred by the slavish Fascist doctrine of "Believe, Obey, Fight."

The Mayor continued to read. He had difficulty with some of the British and American names, and he finally desisted from an unequal struggle with the name of "Eisenhower." At times he reminded me of Silas Wegg in "Our Mutual Friend," "reading on by rote and attaching as few ideas as possible to the text" when he read the "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" to Mr. Boffin, and I couldn't help wondering how much he stood to lose himself by this change of régime and

whether the decline and fall of *this* Roman Empire was causing him any personal careerist concern.

The proclamation was drawing to its close. The cheers were now more syncopated, and three or four cheer leaders appeared to be emerging from the ranks of the chorus. Perhaps they were genuine democrats, perhaps they were making the first move in cashing in on the new regime. I kept catching the eye of one of them. Was he trying to ingratiate himself with a view to favours to come? Why was I growing so cynical already?

The reading of the proclamation was almost finished when the first contingent of marching infantry, the Dorsets, began to pass through the town. With rifle and bayonet and haversack and entrenching tools they trudged along the central avenue past the Town Hall and the Cathedral. From that moment the rest of the proclamation, although it dealt with the topic of currency and rates of exchange, a subject not uninteresting to the newly-conquered and/or liberated, had no chance. The proclamation couldn't compete as an attraction with the marching soldiers. Like most of our national stage effects, the arrival of the soldiers at this particular moment was quite unrehearsed and inconsequential, but it couldn't have been better timed, and the population turned to gaze on the ruggedly cheerful warriors of the Eighth Army.

I think they faintly regretted the absence of flags and regimental bands. The Italians, as has often been pointed out before, enjoy, if not the reality, at any rate the panoply and fancy dress aspect of war; it is a part of the strangely childish streak in the character of this otherwise cynical and realist people. Like their ancestors of two thousand years ago they demand bread *and* circuses, and the spectacle of marching soldiers, gaily caparisoned, has always appealed to a nation that likes its wars flavoured with Wardour Street. They appreciate Gesture, and while they scrambled for the cigarettes which a British soldier tossed them out of a Bren carrier, I believe that they appreciated even more the touch of imagination which inspired three British officers to march up to the town's war memorial to the 1914-1918 dead and give a formal salute to the Italians who had fallen as our allies in the earlier war. It was a fine

and sensitive gesture, and the people standing in the streets broke into genuine and unforced applause.

What a lot "Gesture" can do, and how foolishly short-sighted we are as a nation to neglect it. Within a few minutes of the scene in front of the Italian War Memorial there was another gesture, this time from the other side. The Mayor had invited Major Elwes and myself to join him in a glass of wine at the one hotel in Noto.

We filled our glasses; we raised them; there was a moment of embarrassment as we wondered what was the appropriate toast under the circumstances. The Mayor solved the problem for us.

"To Winston Churchill!" he said gravely.

It may have been Quislingery, Darlanism—what you will. But at the moment it seemed artistically *le mot juste*.

### III. Enlarging the Bridgehead

WE had been forty-eight hours on shore, and already two factors had emerged as likely to condition the entire Sicilian campaign. One was that there was clearly no fight left in the Italian army. It was only the stray sniper and the stray gunner in many places who had offered any resistance, the rest had neither regret nor shame at being taken prisoner, and as in Africa they even sought out their captors. The second factor was that the Germans, from whom we could certainly expect serious and possibly prolonged resistance, had been caught on the wrong foot with their centre of gravity largely in the west of the island. That meant that they had lost the opportunity of throwing our invasion back into the sea at the start; secondly, it meant that they would probably be unable to prevent Montgomery establishing his bridgehead securely. The best that they could now hope for was to deny us entry into the Catania plain and use of the Gerbini airfields. It was therefore towards this plain, the one considerable expanse of



flat open country on the eastern side of the island, that both invader and defender now began to move.

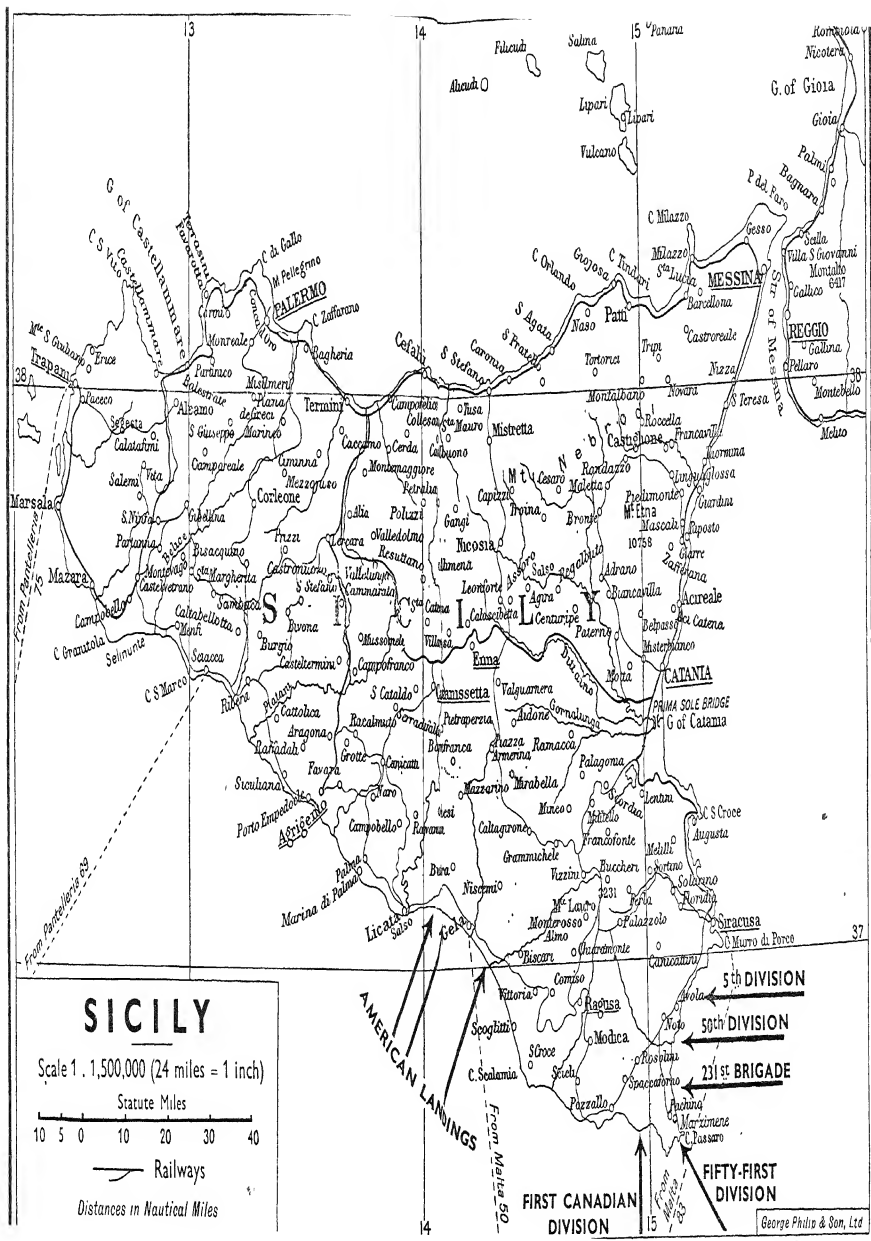
Syracuse had been in our hands since Saturday night, and on Monday morning when I entered, British naval officers were already in the process of taking over the port which was to be our main base of supply throughout the campaign. The town itself wasn't much damaged by air bombardment, but I noticed a sensibly different atmosphere among the population from the cordial welcome of Noto. The first enthusiasm of welcome was over, and already one was conscious of a tendency on the part of the inhabitants to regard us in a somewhat critical light. That day there was a shortage of bread and other food-stuffs in the town and long queues waited, not very patiently, outside the shops. The shortage was temporary rather than basic, it was due to a breakdown of transportation rather than to any positive lack of flour. It was like that in a good many places in Sicily immediately after our occupation, but it was a situation which fairly quickly righted itself.

That day, however, there was an ugly spirit abroad in Syracuse. The line of argument, as nearly as I could understand it, ran: You say that you come as liberators. We can only judge of this by results. 'You come, heralded by bombs, and we find ourselves faced with the prospect of famine as the consequence. We do not dispute, we do not yet dispute, the reality of your good intentions, but we want to see results? *Are you bringing food?*

I must have been asked this last question a dozen times in Syracuse that day. It was natural enough that in the general state of uncertainty the people should fasten on one concrete test of this nature. But it was symptomatic of the bland *insouciance* of the Italians that they should be totally unaware of any responsibility for the régime of the past twenty years which had plunged them into war and defeat. They were shrugging Fascism off their shoulders, bygones were bygones, and now it was our responsibility to feed them and provide for them. Or they would be glad to know the reason why.

Syracuse was curiously hostile that Monday morning, with its food queues in the main streets bursting abruptly into noisy threatening disputation and its side-street loungers eyeing the









intruder silently, inimically. You could have shopped profitably there, as it happened—one of my colleagues that day bought a couple of dozen bottles of French champagne, “reserved for the use of the German forces in Sicily”—but it was an unfriendly atmosphere, and I was glad to push on in pursuit of our advancing forces.

These were now pushing forward with two general objectives. Thirteen Corps was going straight north along the road towards Lentini, the Gerbini plain and Catania. Thirty Corps was fanning out along the roads to the north-west and west in its rôle of flankguard.

Germans had been encountered for the first time at Priolo some miles along the road north of Syracuse. Members of the Hermann Goering Division, they had been stationed in the centre of the island around Enna and Caltanissetta when our forces landed. Now they formed the vanguard of the troops who in increasing quantities were likely to be switched over to this vital sector.

The road is not wide at Priolo, and the cover for a defensive force is abundant. It would seem that some sort of ambush was laid for our advancing troops there. Anyhow the enemy proved to be well positioned with tanks and artillery, and as our own tanks advanced in file along the winding road, enemy guns opened up against them. Very quickly three of our Shermans, one after another, took direct hits from the concealed batteries. With dusk falling the combat was called off to be renewed next morning when, with greater fire power at our command, we succeeded in driving the Germans from the position.

It had been a small action, this first encounter with German troops, but a significant one. It showed us the dangers of advancing up the narrow roads of Sicily with a spearhead of tanks until the hostile guns opposite had been reconnoitred and put out of action. A few days later we were to have the limitations of tanks in conditions of this sort shown up even more forcibly. But the Germans were not in sufficient strength just here to do more as yet than delay our advance with demolitions—the old device with which we had grown so tediously familiar during Rommel’s long retreat from Alamein to Tripoli. Up

this road towards Lentini the Fifth Division pursued the German rearguard.

Meanwhile the Fiftieth had occupied positions to the west of Syracuse and the Malta Brigade, the Highlanders and the Canadians were spreading out towards the west. The last-named, who formed the extreme left of Eighth Army line, were feeling out towards contact with the Americans on their left. They took Modica and worked on towards Ragusa, but when they arrived there just before noon on Monday they found the American Forty-Fifth Division already in possession of the town. And so a further phase of the operation had been smoothly and successfully carried out and the British and American troops were now in continuous contact across the island from the neighbourhood of Augusta in the north to beyond Gela in the west.

A War Correspondent, whose job it is to find the focal point of any operation and to report what he sees there, is particularly familiar with two aspects of campaigning, the static and the mobile. He knows what it is to visit day after day precisely the same sector, to look again and again upon the enemy positions from the same observation post, to become so familiar with the ground that he can estimate immediately the precise significance of a gain of a few hundred yards one way or the other. Of such was the Longstop battle in Tunisia and to a still greater extent the long-drawn struggle for Cassino in the subsequent Italian campaign. But there is another type of operation when the front is abruptly, challengingly fluid. So far from going automatically, unerringly (I had almost said "sightlessly") to the known scene of battle, one drives off in search of it, looking for a vanished enemy. I have known that delirious experience during various phases of the Libyan campaign, in the last days of Tunisia after the fall of Tunis and the battle of Hamman Lif, and again I knew it during those early days in Sicily. Such a day was Tuesday, July 13, or if you prefer the military phraseology, D + 3 Day.

On the previous day the Highlanders had entered Palazzolo from the south, but as so often happened in that early phase of the campaign there were gaps on either flank of the advancing troops. Somewhere between Syracuse and Palazzolo there

was known to be the remnants of the Napoli Division, which was already in process of disintegration. Theoretically this Division was to have been the support to 206 Coastal Division. But 206 Coastal Division had already gone. The larger part of the troops who composed it had either surrendered or disappeared on the day of our landing, and its commander, General Davet, had been captured by the Canadians two days later at Modica. But somewhere up in the hills between Floridaia and Palazzolo the remainder of Napoli was grouped. They were believed to have a few 88 mm. guns, and a number of 105 mm. as well as the light French R 35 tanks which carried a 37 mm. gun and were quite outclassed and outranged by our Shermans. From various points east and south and west our forces were closing in on them.

To one of these hunting parties I attached myself, with a truck borrowed from the Army Film Unit, since my own jeep had still not come ashore. We moved forward in the morning from Floridaia, a small force of Bren carriers, perhaps a dozen in all, but supported by a couple of Sherman tanks. No one quite knew where we should bump the enemy. It was really an immense hunting party with rather cowed human beings as the quarry. Regarding it in that light one might have felt a certain compunction about forming a part of this man-hunt, for we were so immensely superior in almost every arm, but the hunting instinct is a queer one (I don't know that it has ever been adequately explained even by Mr. Jorrocks), and it does appear to thrive on the superiority of strength of the attacker. If the hunters and hunted (whether you consider the latter in terms of foxes or otters or human beings) are on an approximate equality of strength the zest vanishes. You derive a different zest, the zest of battle, but emphatically it *is* different in its basic and essential quality.

Our writhing armoured snake wound upwards through hill country which bore a striking resemblance to the Cumberland fells. There were the same sudden outcroppings of rock, the same coarse wiry grass, the same low stone walls. It looked a country easily defensible, since the winding roads by which alone an attacking column could approach provided innumerable positions where a few well-sited anti-tank guns could have made



the progress of armour an extremely hazardous affair while light field guns should at the same time have been able to shoot up the supporting transport vehicles which in such country would have found it impossible to practise the desert technique of dispersal, for you can't take a three-ton lorry over even the lowest of low stone walls.

There was a whine and a hum and a shell pitched in the valley below us. Another followed, closer. It seemed less in the nature of an ambush than an indication that the "party" had begun. Our column stopped and presently the guns of our Shermans began to reply. They were firing across a deep and broad gulley below the road on our left. I suppose we must have been outranged, for the enemy guns appeared to be 105 mm. and the Sherman only carries a 75 mm. Crouching under the shelter of the cliff on our right I watched our tank guns ranging, saw their shell-bursts and heard the long whine of enemy shells overhead.

And so it continued; like so many engagements that are primarily artillery duels it was uneventful, there was no manœuvre, no advance or retreat, so far as could be seen, of infantry. Just guns pasting away at one another. By this time I fancy that one of our other pursuit columns was lending a hand, and under the combined weight of fire the enemy abruptly and rather inconsequentially called it off. Groups of men carrying white flags were seen approaching down the road, and the firing died away. There was no apparent reason, for the enemy didn't appear to have suffered many losses and they certainly hadn't shot away their ammunition. They had simply had enough. That morning our column took prisoner General Vincenzo, commander of the Napoli Division, his Chief of Staff and half a dozen other staff officers, and that was really the end of Napoli. In the early afternoon we started forward again. But not for long.

There are many things other than direct enemy fire that can hold up an advancing motorised force. It may be delayed by the condition of the roads. Roads may be mined, they may be blocked by rocks and boulders; they may be extensively cratered with dynamite; I have seen places in mountain passes where an entire road for a stretch of fifty yards had been simply blasted

down the precipitous slope of a mountain. Again, bad weather conditions can cause inundations which will seriously interfere with the progress of wheeled traffic. On this occasion it was none of these things but an exploding ammunition dump which caused our next hold-up. Shortly before firing died away a stray shell had scored a direct hit on an enemy dump of cartridges and grenades close to the roadside. There had been a mighty explosion, a thick cloud of black smoke had begun to climb skywards and then for the next hour further progress was impossible. The continuous crackle of minor explosions as one cartridge box after another went up, resembled the burst of machine-gun fire, and was quite as effective in delaying our progress. Presently the dry trees by the roadside began to catch the flame, and burned with the swift efficiency of firewood. There was a broad belt of destruction through which nothing could pass.

Leaving my truck I crept as near as was possible to the flames. There was a blackened and abandoned Italian truck by the roadside, completely burned out. Nearer at hand were two Fiat cars in perfect running order (one of them I subsequently learned had belonged to General Vincenzo himself). I had marked one of these down as my prey, as I was still living a hand-to-mouth existence as regards transport (which reduces a War Correspondent's efficiency by fully fifty per cent.), when I heard a feeble groaning just behind me. An Italian field gunner was lying horribly wounded. He couldn't move his legs and seemed to be in a dying condition. I gave him the contents of my water bottle and a shot of morphia, and he relapsed into a coma and died almost immediately.

I felt an intense irrational anger. I had only seen the man alive for a minute or two, but I found that I had urgently wanted him to live. Why had he felt impelled to stay and get killed? Why hadn't he just made off as his more sensible companions had done? Didn't he know it was all finished? Fascism was finished. Italy was finished. Germany would be finished. It was a wasted life that might have been saved.

A good deal of this was pure sentimentality, of course, a reaction against the "hunting spirit" with which I had set out earlier that morning. But it was a fact that as this campaign

progressed one seemed increasingly to regret, even to resent, Italian deaths. It was all so unnecessary. Why did they have to get in the way and get themselves killed? Our quarrel was not with them. They were so pathetically ill-armed, their uniforms so shabby and second-rate.

For there were very few eagles and trumpets about the Italian troops in Sicily at this time.

Meanwhile another officer had secured the car which I had coveted. This didn't worry me unduly, as I drive seldom and badly, and the officer was going forward in my direction, anyhow. Besides, I had the Army Film Unit lorry to fall back upon. It was important that we should waste no time if we wanted to round up the remaining Italians, and so the leader of our column decided to make a dash for it past the still blazing dump. It was a stimulating method of running the gauntlet, the sort of experience which you look back upon with satisfaction even if at the time you feel you are being a bloody fool. We spaced at something like hundred-yard intervals, and then each car drove full tilt past the dump. A spent bullet did in fact hit the side of the Fiat, but quite harmlessly, and then we were beyond the blaze . . . and beyond the battle too for that matter, for we had entered a new zone not scarred by war.

After a mile or two we came upon a car-park by the roadside crowded with abandoned Italian transport. Most of the vehicles that had been left there were in perfect running order, and no attempt had been made either to render them useless or to destroy the numerous maps and documents inside them. There were enough of these to provide several weeks' work for our Intelligence Staff. I looked rapidly through the maps, selected for myself all duplicates and turned the remainder in to the first British officer to arrive on the spot.

In the road were three of the little light French tanks, each with the ram's head—the insignia of the Napoli Division—freshly painted on the turret. One of these tanks had had a shell put slap through its engine, but the other two appeared, so far as I could judge, to be in perfect order. What had happened to the phantom army that had manned these vehicles?

Looking down in the valley below I saw a partial explanation. A rapidly-moving figure in the familiar bluish-green

uniform of the Italian infantry was picking his way among the farm buildings half a mile away. Once he stopped and looked back; someone from the road fired, but the shot went wide and he continued across the fields towards the welcoming shelter of a haystack. I saw others later in the afternoon engaged in making individual get-aways of the same nature. I suppose it was in part, at any rate, the effect of our air-borne landings that had made the Italian infantryman feel that the roads even behind his own positions were unsafe, and that he stood more chance of escape if he simply abandoned his vehicle, if he had one, and made off across country on foot. Obviously we were not going to pursue individual fugitives over field and hollow and hedge and stream, for in any case it was pretty clear that such soldiers could be written off for the rest of the war. Their sole object by this time was to find some farmhouse or village where they could discard their uniforms, acquire civilian clothing and thereby achieve a pleasing metamorphosis to peace-loving peasants. I have not the least doubt that this happened on a very large scale during the course of the next few days. Both the Eighth and the Seventh Armies, notably the latter, took large numbers of Italian prisoners during the next two or three weeks, but one noted the suspiciously large number of civilians of military age in some of the towns and villages which we occupied in that period. These men had chosen the sensible, the realistic way out. They just turned into peasants again and started off to find their way back to their home town. I knew that it was the final sign of the disintegration of the Italian Army. It had happened to the old Russian Army in the summer of 1917; and Russia had dropped out of that war. It had happened to the Bulgarian Army in the autumn of the following year; the troops had had enough and they just trudged off home, and that had been the end of Bulgaria's participation in that war. Now it was demonstrably happening in Italy.

We now bowled along the upland road towards Palazzolo at peace-time speed and with something of peace-time *abandon*. There was nothing to stop us, and our progress was swift and unadventurous. There was nothing now to suggest war in these hills. Flocks of "silly sheep" browsed contentedly on

the short wiry grass. "Laid on by Arcadia Limited," I remarked, and began almost to believe that we might be granted a Marie Antoinette shepherdess in satin and ribbons and powdered hair to complete the illusion.

The fields were fenced off from the road by a single strand of wire surmounting a low stone wall, and at intervals a notice board, symbol of peace-time, proclaimed with unconscious irony :

"LAND RESERVED FOR HUNTING."

No announcement could have been more grimly appropriate.

There was no difficulty about following the road towards Palazzolo and the Highlanders, for we were continually aided by the frequent and admirable signposts thoughtfully provided by the Automobile Association of Sicily. Not one of these had been removed or even torn down ; the names had not been painted out nor had anyone taken the trouble to indulge in the hoary practical joke of turning the hands of the signposts to point in the wrong direction (a childish temptation I personally find only less great than that of mixing up the boots and shoes outside the bedroom doors in a hotel corridor). The contrast with the spirit of England in the summer of 1940 was inescapable. The removal of signposts is of course no real hindrance to the invader since he may be assumed to be possessed of ample and adequate maps, but it is extremely symptomatic of the will to resist that inspires a nation. The people who tear down signposts before an advancing enemy have gone some way to being ranked with those who will fight that enemy with broken bottles and buckets of scalding water and strips of wooden packing cases hedgehogged with rusty nails . . . as the townsfolk of Prague fought the Germans in October, 1939. Neither method can prevail, nor even effectively deter a mechanised enemy, but they are symptoms of a people that has saved and will continue to save its soul. Militarily, they are almost valueless gestures ; morally, they are beyond all calculation, all—blessed word—logistics.

As we continued beyond the battlefield I felt the scars of war closing up with every mile we progressed. An armoured clash of the nature of that day's scrap around Solarino is a strictly localised affair in many respects. On either side the guns are

aiming to obtain direct hits on enemy guns, infantry or vehicles, there has been no preliminary "area bombardment," no intervention from the skies. Even in Tunisia one had noted how civilian life continued with placid unconcern close up behind the battlefronts, farm carts trundling in and out of homely, muddy little yards where preoccupied Staff Officers conferred gravely over their maps. One had seen manure wagons parked cheek by jowl with Staff cars and the motor bicycles of dispatch riders. And here, too, the normal rhythms of the countryside were swiftly closing up behind the battle. I saw a little group lamenting over a dead horse in a field. What stray shot had brought its life to an end, whether it had tried conclusions with a hidden Teller mine, or whether it had shuffled off its mortal coil in the ordinary course of nature I had no means of knowing. But it represented a tragedy more immediate and more acute to the little huddle of women that stood by it than did any military operation that might be taking place at that moment anywhere on the island.

We were only a few miles past the site of the burning ammunition dump when I saw the Bren carrier that led the advance (our Fiat was now the third vehicle in the column) slow down to a halt. Two elderly farmers in a donkey cart had got themselves firmly stuck across the road. The donkey apparently took exception to Bren carriers. Politely, our column halted. An infantryman jumped from the Bren carrier, there was a certain amount of cajolery and then the donkey consented to proceed. All was well, and our advance could now proceed, too.

I closed my eyes and thought of 1940. I saw the German Panzer Divisions sweeping down through the Low Countries, I saw the roads blocked with civilians fleeing before them, I saw the Stukas diving from the skies, and then I saw the little man from Durham coaxing the donkey. . . .

A mile or two farther on—it was just before we met the first patrols of the Highlanders from Palazzolo—we drove past a girl picking flowers by the roadside in the mild evening sunshine. She scarcely looked up as we drove by.

For war is just as crazily surrealist as that.

That Tuesday, July 13, was in some sense one of the key

dates of the entire campaign. By midday it was the opinion of Allied Headquarters that the bridgehead in Sicily could now be regarded as firmly established and that we were virtually safe from any attempt that might be made to push us into the sea. Eighth Army alone held two supply ports, Syracuse and Augusta (the latter had been cleared of the enemy on the night of July 12-13), and a stretch of coast some thirty miles long with numerous beaches as emergency landing points. It had fanned out so far inland as to establish an adequate hinterland which would give Montgomery room to manoeuvre in the not very probable event of any German counter-attack in strength. Already Fifth Division was approaching Lentini, held up in its advance more by a particularly bad demolition a little south of the town than by German resistance, for the Germans had not yet arrived in force in the area; its left flank had taken Mellili, a strangely Cornish-looking slate-tiled village which had been shelled from the sea by our supporting warships; Fiftieth Division took Sortino that morning; the Highland Division moving still further inland from Palazzolo had reached and was about to assault the mountain stronghold of Vizzini and the Canadians were in contact with the American Seventh Army at Ragusa.

All this had been achieved without any serious action having been fought. The Americans at Gela had met with some considerable resistance upon landing, and for the following day or two, but the pressure against them had relaxed when it was realised by the enemy command that the preponderant weight of our attack had been thrown further east and that the Italians had proved totally unable to cope with it. We had established our bridgehead, we had caught the German forces out of position and we had demonstrated that the Italian troops would fight with even less resolution in defence of their native land than they had fought in Africa. And we had already taken something not far short of 20,000 prisoners. That was the balance sheet at the end of the sixty hours that had elapsed since the landing.

On the enemy side, too, that Tuesday was also a day of profound significance. It was probably the day on which the German command decided to abandon any further attempt at

maintaining themselves in the west and centre of the island and to withdraw their forces towards the "Etna bastion" in the north-east. From that day onwards they ceased seriously to contest the American advance towards Palermo and the northern coast, contenting themselves with delaying their progress as much as possible with demolitions and an occasional rearguard action. On the other hand they made every effort to strengthen their left or eastern flank which was facing the Eighth Army. The Hermann Goering Division was moved into position in the Catania plain, and parachutists were rushed by air from France to the same area. The Germans had had only the Hermann Goering Division and the renovated Fifteenth Panzer Grenadier Division (rather a motly collection which was in the process of being re-formed to replace the old Fifteenth Panzers of Libyan fame who had been rounded up *in toto* at the end of the Tunisian campaign). Now, in addition to the members of the First Parachute Division, which never arrived entire, they began to ferry over the Twenty-ninth Panzer Grenadier Division. For the remainder of the campaign the order of battle was, roughly speaking, Hermann Goering and parachutists on the coast, Fifteenth P.G. in front of Etna, Twenty-ninth P.G. opposite the Americans in the east.

It must have been a bitter decision for the German commander to make so early in the struggle, but the direction and strength of the Allied attack and the almost total collapse of Italian resistance left him with no alternative. The short sea crossing from Messina to Reggio had to be protected at all costs if a *débâcle* on the Tunisian pattern was to be avoided; therefore the German troops must be concentrated towards Messina. The immense bulk of Etna provided a natural defensive position in this area. It prevented any land approaches being made to Messina save by three roads—the east coast road through Catania, the north coast road from Palermo via Milazzo, and a third road which winds round the western side of Etna through Bronte and Randazzo, rejoining the Catania road not far from Taormina and linked also with the north coast road.

The fact that no advance could be made upon Messina save by these three routes and that fully three-quarters of the Etna "line" really was impregnable, since you cannot get tanks or



transport or guns or even infantry over its lava slopes, meant that the problem of defending this north-eastern corner of Sicily was greatly simplified. The Allies could only advance by certain stereotyped routes, and there was little opportunity of surprise—unless a sea-borne landing behind the enemy were to be attempted. There was no part of this terrain where our superiority in tanks could be usefully employed—and after the first clashes on the Catania plain our military experts were inclined to doubt whether the Catania plain itself was “tank country,” a point I shall discuss in detail later in this book. Superficially, too, it appeared doubtful whether we could effectively employ our numerical superiority of infantry.\*

And so the campaign moved into its second phase. The landing and the establishment of the invading forces ashore was complete, and now British, Americans and Germans moved towards their objectives, and the first real clash was imminent.

Catania was now the next goal of the Eighth Army. Thirteen Corps was to advance straight across the Gerbini plain and the Simeto river towards the city while Thirty Corps pushed north-west along the mountain roads into the interior of the island in the general direction of Leonforte and Etna in the hope of cutting off the retreat of the Germans, while the right wing of the Americans moved through Caltanissetta with the same purpose.

On either side the opening of the second phase was marked by renewed and significant operations by airborne troops.

On the evening following the little action at Solarino which I have described, I had caught up with the Highland Division and lain at their Headquarters during the night. “Headquarters” is pictorially speaking a misleading word in this connection. It conjures up a picture of rows of Army huts and concrete floors, but in fact the headquarters of a Division during a mobile operation of this nature is simply where the Divisional trucks—Signals, “Ops.,” “I,” “Q” and the rest—

\* This did not in fact prove to be the case. General Alexander was able to relieve his units in the line with much greater frequency than was Kesselring, and the fact that for the crucial attack upon the Centuripe position at the beginning of August he was able to produce an entirely fresh Division “out of the hat” was one of the decisive factors in bringing the campaign to an early and victorious close.

happen to halt for the night. That night it was a bare hillside above a village called Buccheri. I slept out under the stars, and even in that Mediterranean July weather found it pretty chilly and was glad to build a sangar of rocks around my blankets as some protection against the wind.

I woke early next morning, but not so early as the Headquarters staff of Fifty-First Division who were already packing up preparatory to a further move forward the following day, for the Malta Brigade, operating with the Highlanders, had reached and entered the hill fortress of Vizzini, reported to be a "second Keren," the previous afternoon.

Before breakfast I strolled over to the Intelligence truck to hear the latest news of our advance.

It was disquieting.

Enemy parachutists had started dropping around Vizzini about four o'clock that morning, and in a brief action before dawn had driven our troops out of the town and were now in the process of establishing themselves there in strength. Unless they could be thrown out, the loss of Vizzini might radically upset our whole time-table for conquering Sicily. These parachutists were understood to have been stationed at Avignon and to have left France only two days previously, having been flown to Naples and thence direct to Sicily. It looked like a hold-up on this front for a day or so until we could concentrate for a further assault, and so I determined to switch over to the coastal area and find out how Thirteen Corps' drive towards Catania was getting on. This meant swinging right and driving by little frequented roads towards the sea. The roads would be little frequented because they would be at right angles to our communication lines and consequently there would not be the customary stream of transport vehicles flowing up them. The officer who was accompanying me in the Fiat was, quite rightly in view of the morning's news, apprehensive about the possibility of running into parachutists or stray snipers, the jetsam of yesterday's battle, and so while he drove I sat at his side keeping a very sharp look-out along these lanes. But we encountered no parachutists. The only "hostile personnel" we did meet was a single Italian sailor tramping back along the roads from the direction of Syracuse—an obvious deserter. He

was so clearly homeward bound and had no intention of fighting anyone under any circumstances that I felt tempted to let him go, but prisoners are always useful to one's own side for interrogation purposes and so we solemnly Dick Turpinned him (not to the extent of taking his money) gave him a cigarette, told him to hop into the A.F.P.U. truck that was following us and turned him in at the first prisoner of war cage we found. I hope he got back to his own family later; he so obviously meant no harm to anyone.

As we approached the village of Sortino we could see a line of transport vehicles ahead. We knew that Sortino had been taken by Fiftieth Division twenty-four hours earlier, but in view of the Vizzini episode we thought it better to approach them with considerable circumspection.

But they were our own.

I found Fiftieth Division headquarters not far the other side of Sortino. The Intelligence people there had not heard of the dropping of the German parachutists at Vizzini and the recapture of the town by the enemy, and I was retained for some time to tell my story to various senior officers, since it proved impossible to establish telephonic or wireless contact with the Highland Division now somewhere between Buccheri and Vizzini. Meanwhile I enquired eagerly about the progress of the coastal battle. Here too it was a story of airborne troops, but of airborne troops of both sides.

Both by road and air the Germans were now rushing troops across from west to east of Sicily, and it was estimated that a force about the equivalent of two battle groups (approximately two weak brigades) had been shifted from Palermo to Adrano and Paterno on the northern edge of the Catania plain where the important Gerbini airfields, the largest and most numerous group in the island, were situated. Our own troops were close on the southern fringe of the plain, but were not yet in a position to debouch into it.

The effect of this news was that with the advance guards of the opposing armies practically facing one another across the broad and flat plain in front of Catania we could no longer hope to get immediate effective control of the airfields. Lying as they did in an open No-Man's-Land between the forces, neither

side would be in a position to make use of them during the next phase, though each would have the negative satisfaction of denying them to the enemy. It implied also that the plain in the midst was likely to become the scene of an imminent battle, with armour presumably playing a predominant part, which would determine the fate of Catania.

Meanwhile we had struck again with our airborne forces and with a greater measure of success than had attended the former operation of this nature three days earlier.

The plain of Catania is a tongue-shaped area of land as flat and open as a characteristic Fenland or Midland *paysage*. Topographically it forms a total contrast to all the rest of the island which is almost everywhere, save for a narrow coastal strip in the south, rugged and hilly. About midway across the plain runs the Simeto river, no mean obstacle, though its banks are shallow enough, even at this time of year. Close to the mouth the Simeto is spanned by the 240-yard long steel-girdered bridge known as Prima Sole.

Obviously the vital point in the whole battlefield was this bridge. If we were able to get possession of it, troops, guns, tanks and supply vehicles could be pushed across the Simeto towards Catania, and the entire plain might be cleared, if the tank action that must develop went in our favour, in a matter of hours or at any rate a day or two. Conversely, if the enemy were successful in destroying the bridge he might well hold us on the Simeto line long enough to enable him to bring up further reinforcements and consolidate his position around Etna. Prima Sole, in short, was the inescapable bottleneck for any force advancing across the Catania plain, since the next bridge at Sferro is a dozen miles up on the inland fringe of the plain towards the foothills.

At about ten o'clock on the night of Tuesday, July 13, members of the First British Airborne Brigade were dropped by plane and glider around Prime Sole with a view to seizing the bridge, preventing its destruction and holding on in positions on either bank until the arrival of the leading ground forces advancing from the direction of Syracuse and Lentini, who were expected to make contact sometime in the forenoon of Wednesday. By contrast with the weather on the eve of D Day the

night was calm with the result that although the enemy put up an extremely formidable curtain of flak, a considerably larger number of planes managed to drop their troops somewhere in the neighbourhood of the objective. Fifty-six of the one hundred and seven planes managed to put troops down somewhere in the Gerbini plain (not necessarily close to Prima Sole), but twenty-six of the remainder—a rather high proportion—found the flak too heavy for them and returned to base with their loads still aboard. Of the seventeen gliders employed twelve succeeded in landing.

From ten o'clock on Tuesday night until one a.m. on Wednesday morning our parachutists were coming down all over the Gerbini plain, on the slopes of Etna and, all too often, in the sea off Catania. Prima Sole bridge was actually seized by a little party of fourteen men who removed the demolition charges and dug themselves in close to the northern end of the bridge. In the course of the night they were progressively joined by others who had fallen further afield, and by dawn about two hundred men had rallied in the neighbourhood. They were armed with light mortars and machine-guns, and they had five six-pounder anti-tank guns. The landing of anti-tank guns from the air was an experiment of great tactical importance since the chief danger to which isolated parachutists are exposed is that they may be run down and annihilated by enemy tanks before the guns of their own ground forces arrive. Every tank crew dreams of catching hostile infantry in the open, unprovided with anti-tank guns.

When daylight came the parachutists held the bridge in undamaged condition, and they were extended on either side of it. They were still cut off by several miles from the main body of Eighth Army, and they had to face repeated attacks from Germans on either side of them. Crouching in such shallow manholes as they had been able to dig before dawn they lay under the burning July sun, continually shelled by the enemy guns and again and again driving off by their steady fire the attempts of the German and Italian infantry to infiltrate stealthily up to the bridge now from the north, now from the south. They had hoped to be joined by ground forces of the Eighth Army long before noon, but hour by hour the day wore on,

noon came, the sun began gradually to slope down towards the west, and still there was no sign of movement along the dusty road that leads from Lentini to Prima Sole.

Four times the enemy thrust vainly against them in an endeavour to exterminate this small force and recapture the bridge. Four times they were repulsed. The more dangerous of these assaults came from the northern side since the enemy south of the river realised comparatively early in the afternoon their own danger of being caught between two fires and drew off to crossings higher up the river. Under pressure of a fifth assault the commander of the remaining parachutists decided that in order to keep his force in being at all it would be necessary to draw them back across the river, and at about seven-thirty in the evening, shortly before dusk, he withdrew across the bridge to the southern bank.

About half an hour later the vanguard of the Eighth Army, men of the Durham Light Infantry, began to arrive from the south and established contact with the parachutists. They had been held up by an enemy rearguard action at Carlentini, and had not finally cleared Lentini itself until four o'clock that afternoon.

And so when night fell the battle had been half won. The bridge had been saved from demolition, our advanced forces had reached the Simeto and relieved the parachutists, but for the moment we had no bridgehead on the northern bank, and it remained to be seen whether the enemy could reinforce in sufficient strength to establish himself on the Simeto and bar our further progress.

Following the campaign during those early days of Sicily had something of the quality of high adventure. You knew that the entire army was on the move, and when you rose in the morning you had little idea where you would lay your head at night. You flitted from one unit to another in pursuit of that elusive will-o'-the-wisp, the focal point of the battle. It was usually hard enough work tracking down Divisional headquarters, let alone catching up with the battle itself; for until the clash at Prima Sole there had been no battle, and my little skirmish at Solarino on the Tuesday was more or less characteristic of the engagements of those first few days.

During a mobile campaign every War Correspondent is faced with a peculiarly exasperating dilemma. Shall he get as far forward as possible and endeavour to keep touch with the actual vanguard, the spearhead of fighting troops; or shall he make sure of never spending a day without returning to his "communications-head"—the point from which his despatches leave? Again and again I have been torn by this problem. Every instinct is always in favour of getting forward and keeping forward. You know then that you are getting the real, the eye-witness story, which is what, after all, one is sent to a theatre of war to obtain. And, moreover, it is extraordinarily exhilarating. I do not propose at this point to enter into the psychology of this, though as likely as not I shall do so subsequently in this book. It is, I know, not easy to justify ethically an exhilaration which comes from being in close proximity to a place where numbers of one's fellow creatures are being violently torn in pieces by lumps of flying metal. Nor can I pretend to understand why individual murder is sordid and vulgar (personally I have never followed the course of a single murder trial in the newspapers during the entire thirty-nine years of my life), yet mass murder is assuredly neither sordid nor vulgar. It is not merely the heroism that transmutes it, for a single murderer may show plenty of heroism and yet remain a profoundly uninspiring spectacle for eye or mind. I repeat: I do not know why one should be stirred by mass murder, and I cannot attempt to justify it on ethical grounds. But the instinct is there; it is as old as Homer and the book of Genesis. And when the battle is afoot something much more elemental than one's professional conscience stirs the blood.

"Go, hang yourself, brave Crillon! We fought at Arques, and you were not there."

In fact, the wise and experienced Correspondent knows that his first duty is not to go gallivanting in pursuit of all and every battle, but to make sure that means of transmission are available to enable him to get his despatch back to his paper. You may write with the pens of men and angels, but it will avail you nothing if there is a single hold-up in the sequence of despatch rider on motor-cycle, aeroplane, second despatch

rider, military censor, R.A.F. censor, possibly political censor, possibly naval censor, censor's clerk, third despatch rider or messenger to telegraph office, electric telegraph. For, in the reporting of a war you are apt to learn to your cost that "Transmission" is all the law and the prophets. "Look after your transmission and your stories will look after themselves" might be the advice of any cynical old War Correspondent to a beginner. And that means keeping pretty close to cable-head for as long as you possibly can and returning to it as frequently as possible. You do not see or experience so much that way, but what you do see or experience—or more probably pick up at third hand—has a considerably better chance of reaching your newspaper than has the really authentic front-line despatch.

Yet in the final analysis it is the front-line man who wins the last trick. For to accompany the soldier in the field is not only to obtain more detailed and accurate information (and several years of war reporting based on a highly academic training in military history have not wholly deprived me of a lingering partiality for accuracy in matters of fact and detail); to accompany the soldier in the field is also to experience the genuine Aristotelian catharsis, to purge one's soul with pity and terror. It is not an ignoble experience to meet men who have just come from the Shadow of Death. You may even, for five fleeting minutes, be privileged to share their own routine battle experience, and it is worth while, for you will write all the better for it. Besides, you will have the pleasure of going back and telling your friends (who were not there) how brave you have been.

Yes, it is better to have been at Arques.

But that Wednesday, while the parachutists were defying the men of Hermann Goering Division from their shallow slit trenches on the open river bank of Simeto I was not bound for Arques or Prima Sole or anywhere else very martial; I was cruising pleasantly back towards Syracuse and army headquarters which had just arrived on the island for the prosaic purpose of establishing contact with my means of transmission. It was a day of blazing heat, and driving southward from Sortino in



the Fiat, which had belonged to General Vincenzo, late commander of the late Napoli Division, just twenty-four hours earlier, I sighted with joy the ideal spot for a picnic lunch—a little roadside dell half-hidden by trees with a nearby fountain gushing out clear water. An elderly shepherd who looked as though he had strayed out of a Theocritan idyll was seated with his flock in the dell. We exchanged grave salutations, and he accepted a tin of bully beef and a cigarette with a dignity which struck me as more Spanish than Italian. We sat in the cool shade munching our lunch in silence, and I brought out a tin of grapefruit which I had been carrying with me from Cairo to be eaten on just such a day as this, when one's heat and thirst justified the extravagance on practical grounds and when the sylvan setting gave an atmosphere of "treat" to the meal.

For half an hour I let myself browse and doze in the shade, lulled by the faint hum of insects above the water, and murmuring to myself such tags of Theocritus and Horace as I could recall, and throwing in an occasional polite eighteenth-century pastoral couplet as a makeweight. I was completely and utterly happy, and I strove to fuse my present mood with kindred hours of tranquillity in the past—a summer afternoon with an old friend in the gardens of St. John's, Oxford; another afternoon in a wine garden at Neckargemunde near Heidelberg; Corfe Castle at sunset on a certain midsummer eve; the rocky ridge above Salamis on the afternoon of September 15, 1940 (I had taken the day off from my work in Athens and climbed to the spur from which Xerxes watched the destruction of his fleet by the Athenians twenty-four centuries ago and witnessed with its failure the defeat of tyranny in its attempt to crush a free people.

Xerxes watching the sea around Salamis; Goering brooding over the English Channel.)

But work had to be done. They were fighting around Prima Sole bridge that afternoon, and they were fighting at Carlentini, not ten miles away from the scene of my pastoral.

I roused myself, found another cigarette for the Theocritan shepherd, hunted out some chocolate for his boy, and then we gravely took leave of one another.

I don't think it had occurred to either of us that we were technically "enemies."

I found that Advanced Army Headquarters had arrived and was established just south of Syracuse, precisely at the point where Nicias and Lamachus had pitched their camp in the siege of Syracuse which Thucydides records in what is surely the best continuous piece of War Correspondence in all history. It was comforting to see some of the old desert faces again. Though I have travelled a good deal in out-of-the-way parts of Europe in the last dozen years, I have not been the type of Englishman who resents the appearance of his fellow countrymen on the scene. *Au contraire*, they are often a very present help in time of trouble, linguistic or otherwise. In the same way, it was pleasant to contact other Correspondents. I met Ronald Monson, the Australian Correspondent, who had landed with the Fiftieth Division, and Edward Ardizzone, the official war artist; both of whom I had known in Africa. They invited me to join them in a drink.

The drink was champagne. Bollinger 1928, I believe, but I cannot recall at this time.

I raised my eyebrows and my glass simultaneously. Monson explained that he and Ardizzone had made a bee-line for the principal wine merchant of Syracuse as soon as they entered the town. They bought, I believe, twelve dozen bottles of champagne straight off.

"It's been rather fun," said Ardizzone, "to go up to thirsty-looking front line men and casually offer them a glass of champagne. Their first reaction is an outburst of incredulous blasphemy coupled with a rooted objection to having their adjectival legs adjectivally pulled. Then you merely produce your bottle and invite them to produce a mug. After that you leave the unit with a suspicion that Jasper Maskelyne has descended in their midst."

"We ought to be up forward watching that battle to-night," said Monson, pouring out a second round.

"Yes, I agreed, "we ought."

I slept under the trees in an olive grove by the shore of the great harbour of Syracuse. Not long after dark enemy aircraft came over and bombed the port. During the early days of the

invasion they did this every night. Later they desisted, for they were losing too many planes and it was not worth while. Their favourite time for raiding was normally just after dusk and just before dawn; their favourite method of attack was to sweep in from the sea at a great height and then, cutting off their engines, to glide down towards the target. But we had plenty of ack-ack ashore; for these guns had—and rightly—a very high priority among the war material which we were disembarking. Moreover, such enemy planes as we brought down appeared for the most part to be inferior and semi-obsolete types, the majority being the old Caproni 42.

Looking up through the branches I saw the night bespangled with flares and the red and green and yellow of our tracer bullets, and I realised once again the ghastly beauty of war. Those brilliantly coloured lights seen on that warm summer night through a lattice of olive branches were pure Walt Disney, but Disney at his most imaginative and most beautiful, the Disney of "Fantasia."

I toyed drowsily with the conception of Night as a sort of celestial courtesan bedecked with Verey lights and tracers as with jewels, deriving beauty and vitality, like Faustine in Swinburne's poem, from the deaths of men.

For that night of beauty and lofty fantasy cost the Axis eighteen planes.

## IV.

## Prima Sole

THE Battle of Prima Sole bridge was, with the possible exception of the attack on Centuripe rather more than a fortnight later, the hardest fought engagement in the whole Sicilian campaign. It was an infantryman's battle, and it was the old Fiftieth Division, the veterans of the desert, which most distinguished itself, and pre-eminently distinguished was that fine fighting regiment, the Durham Light Infantry.

Prima Sole really falls into three phases. There is the preliminary operation of the parachutists who captured the bridge

and defended it throughout Wednesday, July 14. There is the battle proper in which infantry and tanks secured and extended the bridgehead across the river in three days of continuous fighting, from Thursday to Saturday. Finally there is the epilogue that should have heralded the opening of the new week—the sweep of our armour forward across the northern half of the Gerbini plain and the entry into Catania. That epilogue never materialised, and when Catania was eventually entered by our troops on the morning of August 7, it was because it had been quietly evacuated by the Germans following the breach of the Etna Line at Centuripe some distance inland.

At nightfall on Wednesday the vanguard of Fiftieth Division had made contact with the remainder of the parachutists on the southern bank of the Simeto river. Speed was clearly the essence of any successful operation in this sector, and accordingly at dawn on Thursday, General Kirkman led off with the 151st Infantry Brigade.

Sherman tanks, grinding one after another down the road, preceded the infantry across the bridge. The enemy reaction was immediate and vigorous. From stone pillboxes, constructed to meet just such an emergency as the present, from the cover of hedges and shallow ditches, and from the occasional white farm buildings, they returned a brisk counter-fire. Flat as the plain was beyond the river, the hedges in their summer fullness provided fully adequate cover for his 88-mm. anti-tank guns. Inevitably our Shermans were bottlenecked by the bridge, and one after another they fell victims to the "eighty-eights." The first half-mile of road beyond the bridge became such a shambles of shattered vehicles and wounded and dying men as I have seldom seen in war. The tanks stopped where they were hit and the men lay where they died, for there could be no question of burial at that stage of the battle.

It was the acid test of tanks under European conditions. We had expected a tank battle in the Catania plain, and its openness and extreme flatness seemed to promise that our tanks would be able to operate with some freedom there, as they had done in the desert. In fact, the cover proved sufficient for the enemy anti-tank guns to operate with considerable effect,

and during the next few days I was several times informed by senior officers that "of course, this is not tank country." No doubt that is true, but in that case there is perhaps no region in western or central Europe that is "tank country," at any rate in the sense in which we grew accustomed to think of it in Africa, and consequently we had reached a *reductio ad absurdum* in tank warfare—which I am not prepared to admit.

The road beyond Prima Sole was slightly embanked above the level of the surrounding fields, but it ought not to have been impossible for our tanks to get clear of that dangerous strip of highway and fan rapidly out over the countryside. By that means we might have overrun the plain and been in Catania at least a fortnight earlier than we were. And if we had been in Catania a fortnight earlier we might have reached Messina in plenty of time to prevent the escape of the German Divisions in Sicily, which were ultimately extracted—when the Germans had determined on evacuation—with a minimum of loss.

On the other hand, as there was no easy way of crossing the river with armoured vehicles except by the bridge, tank after tank might have been destroyed by the enemy at its approaches, and the attempt to force an early decision might merely have produced a holocaust.

It was a difficult choice for any General to have to make. If we erred, we erred on the side of over-caution. We saved ourselves heavier *immediate* losses, but lost the *possibility* of larger long-term dividends. I am pretty certain what would have been the decision of a Russian commander, confronted with a dilemma of this nature. But Britain has not got the population of Russia and, taking the longest view, she cannot afford to wage war with Russian prodigality of life.

And so our tanks failed to establish themselves beyond the river on Thursday morning, and consequently the unprotected infantry had to come back too. Once more it looked as if the enemy had it in his power to destroy the bridge, and during the rest of the day our artillery concentrated on shelling the northern approaches so as to deny the enemy access to it. For reasons which it is difficult to ascertain he showed a curious reluctance to commit himself to the destruction of the bridge although

## PRIMA SOLE

he would appear to have had opportunities of doing so. Meanwhile we had made one or two crossings with a handful of tanks which forded the river higher up, but these too were forced back by enemy fire. The trouble here was not so much the difficulty of getting the tanks themselves across as of following them up with wheeled transport, and a modern army is largely tied to the movements of its transport. That was why we needed Prima Sole, and needed it intact.

In the small hours of Friday morning the Durham Light Infantry rushed the bridge by moonlight and established themselves on the northern bank before daybreak. Their position was extremely precarious. They had only such cover as they had been able to make for themselves with their entrenching tools before dawn, and they had to work under constant threat of enemy detection in ground baked with the summer drought. Their ordeal was much the same as that of the parachutists on the same spot two days earlier, but by this time the enemy, fully alive to the importance of the bridge, had brought a considerably greater weight of fire-power to bear. They were pounding the approaches to the bridge with field guns, "eighty-eights," mortars and machine-guns, and such tanks as got across the bridge found it impossible to remain on the further side.

That Friday was the critical day of the Prima Sole battle. Everything now turned on the ability of the Durhams to maintain themselves in their bridgehead which was still only some two hundred yards in depth. There was a real danger of them running out of ammunition and supplies, and accordingly a number of laden Bren carriers were rushed across the bridge in the course of the afternoon with heavy covering fire from our guns. We lost several of the carriers in the process, but that death or glory charge really turned the tide.

However, it looked like being an impasse at Prima Sole, and so a detachment of infantry from the Fifth Division was pushed across the river some distance higher up where clumps of bulrushes afforded some cover for the actual crossing. They, too, were pinned down by enemy fire before they had proceeded very far, but by nightfall it was becoming clear that we had tided over the worst of the crisis and that the *local* initiative

was increasingly passing to us just as the *general* initiative had always been with us.

Again General Kirkman had resort to a moonlight attack. He pushed forward two battalions of D.L.I. to strengthen the battalion already beyond the river. Bren carriers were then again sent forward as on the previous afternoon. But their primary objective was now to draw the fire of the enemy guns while the Shermans lumbered across behind them. That there had been, as the tank crews asserted, a good many "eighty-eights" trained on the river approaches is certain, but perhaps there were not quite so many "eighty-eights" as they thought, or else they had been thinned out by our counter-fire of the previous day. Anyhow, when our Shermans did at last succeed in pushing beyond the river on Saturday morning they found much of the hostile fire coming from infantry armed with machine-guns and light mortars and concealed in the hedges and ditches in no greater comfort or security than were our own men. And this fire was speedily silenced when our tanks turned their Besa guns upon the ditches to right and left of the road. One Sherman alone "smoked out" in this manner a party of six officers and one hundred and forty men who promptly emerged and surrendered themselves. The success of the tanks on this occasion was so immediate that one could not help wondering whether they might not have been employed in this way at an earlier stage of the battle. That, at any rate, was the opinion of many infantrymen who affirmed that there had at no time been a very large number of anti-tank guns opposite them and that most of the counter-fire had come from enemy infantry weapons—machine-guns and mortars—with which our tanks were well qualified to deal.

Prima Sole had thus been secured, and secured intact. In the course of Saturday morning we rapidly extended our bridge-head and by noon our forward infantry were already lining a ditch fifteen hundred yards beyond the river while enemy counter-fire had been reduced to occasional infantry sniping when our men showed themselves beyond that point and an occasional shell dropped on or near the road. When I crossed Prima Sole for the first time early on Saturday afternoon I was astonished to discover the strength in which we already held

our new positions and the freedom with which our transport was passing backwards and forwards beyond the bridge. Armoured cars, tanks, guns, transport vehicles, staff cars were driving unconcernedly almost up to the shallow ditch at right angles to the road where a company of haggard, exhausted men squatted or lay among the debris of what had formerly been an enemy position. It was an indication of their weariness that no one had yet set about burying the dead Germans who lay in and around the trench. Living British and dead Germans were sprawled almost in alternation along the ditch. Our men were just too tired to do anything about it. They threw some scrap or other over the face of the corpse and left it at that. One of these Germans had a sheet of *Picture Post* covering his face. It displayed a chorus girl in a frill of skirts and petticoats in the ample style of the eighteen nineties dancing the can-can . . .

I shuddered, thinking of the awful incongruities of life and death, of Webster's skull among the wildflowers and Donne's "bracelet of bright hair about the bone." But the little man from Durham, crouched in the ditch side by side with the corpse, saw nothing specially incongruous. When you have been in the continuing presence of death for two days and two nights you are not apt to retain a nicely poised sense of the macabre. For you have other things to think about.

Having seen our bridgehead established far beyond the river, the easy movements of our troops and vehicles to the north bank, and the comparative absence of enemy counter-fire, I felt convinced that the battle for Catania was at an end. The city lay only five miles distant in full view across an open plain. It seemed likely that a further leap forward by our infantry and tanks that night would cover the remainder of the distance and that one would have to get up early on the morrow if one wanted to enter Catania with the vanguard.

A direct attack with a view to rounding off the battle was planned for that night, I learned. At ten o'clock a heavy artillery bombardment was to open with a view to drawing the fire of and destroying the remaining enemy batteries. As the infantry advanced, a creeping barrage of artillery fire would precede them, blotting out the positions of the German infantry.



It was also understood that a sea-borne landing north of Catania was imminent with the object of trapping the Axis troops as they withdrew northwards along the not excessively broad corridor between the slopes of Etna and the sea.

For some reason this plan was never put into operation. It may have been that after the ordeal which Fiftieth Division had endured in the past few days, the British commander did not feel justified in launching them immediately in an all-out attempt against Catania; it may have been that the rapid advance of the left wing of Eighth Army (Thirty Corps) through the mountains towards the centre of the island seemed to offer a bigger strategic dividend with less immediate outlay, for the Canadians moving up the tortuous road towards Etna in the heart of the island were averaging a steady fifteen miles a day and had entered Piazza Armerina twenty miles beyond Vizzini before dawn on Saturday; it may have been that the necessary landing-craft could not be concentrated in time (certainly there was no lack of shipping for the purpose, since our losses in the whole disembarkation operation had been on a negligible scale).

Whatever the motive, the decision seems to have been taken some time during that evening to pull our punch. The large scale bombardment was called off, and the advance of the infantry was restricted to a job forward just so far as they could get without involving themselves in a full-scale assault. And so, though the armoured cars and Bren carriers rattled down the road and over the bridge under the full moon, and the infantry, dim sombre silhouettes in a night warm as an English summer noon, plodded up the road after them, yet it was not the lunge into Catania for which one had hoped. The infantry went forward perhaps half a mile. They met enemy opposition in a chain of copses and farm buildings stretching across the plain about half-way between the Simeto river and Catania. And so the attack was not pressed home, and for nearly three weeks we resigned ourselves to a stalemate in the plain in front of Catania whilst we proceeded gradually to force a decision through the more difficult country to the north-west.

I tried at the time to find reasons for this delay and this switching of the centre of gravity from the coast to the inland country to the west of Etna. The increasing presence of German

troops replacing the apathetic and indifferent Italians on this sector was an indication that the phase of light-hearted advance was over and that we should have to fight grimly all the way into and possibly through the town. That meant heavy casualties, and although you cannot win a battle or a campaign without casualties yet it is an axiom of military science that a victory obtained with few casualties is a victory twice won. The prospect of fighting our way street by street through Catania was neither militarily nor yet politically attractive. We had little experience of street fighting in July, 1943, since the African campaigns had provided almost our only battle experience for more than two years, but nowadays, with the examples of Ortona and Cassino before our eyes, it would be a bold commander who would voluntarily commit himself to a frontal attack on a large town if any alternative method of achieving his goal was practicable.

Then there was the whole question of tanks. Prima Sole had been a very definite revelation of the limitations of the tank in European conditions and against contemporary anti-tank weapons. The farms and hedges and ditches and copses of the Gerbini plain had proved quite adequate to conceal the enemy's 88 mm. and 150 mm., not to mention his lighter infantry guns. Even in the desert, which was as flat as this plain and far more lacking in cover, Eighth Army had known what it was to run into an ambush of 88 mm. guns. *A fortiori* . . .

In military textbooks it is the job of the artillery to pinpoint and destroy the anti-tank guns of the enemy, and it is possible that General Montgomery considered that he had not yet at his disposal in this forward area a sufficient striking power of field guns to justify him in pushing the operation in front of Catania to a decision. An immense strain had been put on his transport during the preceding week, and it is reasonable to suppose that supply problems would not at that time permit him to achieve a rapid concentration of fire-power above the Simeto. He had only one road to supply the two Divisions on the coast—the road that runs up from the ports of Syracuse and Augusta through Lentini—and the strain put upon this single transport artery was very great.

And so the decision was taken. Thirteen Corps, with the

Fifth and Fiftieth Divisions relieving one another in rotation, would, during the next phase, maintain a passive rôle. As in a relay race in which the baton passes from one runner to another, so Thirty Corps on the inland flank of Eighth Army would now take up the running in the forthcoming stage.

For three days I made my camp on a hill-top overlooking the Simeto and Prima Sole bridge and waited for the final thrust that would take our troops into Catania. Each morning I would drive hopefully down the road and across the bridge. Every day it was possible to drive just a little further forward, a little closer to Catania, but sooner or later—always, in fact, sooner than one expected—one was inexorably held up. It always took the same form. An infantry subaltern, acting as temporary traffic controller, would stroll up to one's car and remark casually :

"I shouldn't drive any further. The Boche are still in those farm buildings . . . over there . . . and they've got that bend in the road a hundred yards ahead nicely taped. We lose someone there every now and then."

And that would be that. I would get what information I could from the forward battalions in the line, but it was rather small beer when compared with the deep draught of triumph to which we had become habituated during the first week of the invasion. Then I would return once more to my hill-crest, where, seated under an immense fig-tree, I could gaze directly on to the enemy positions, the white town of Catania, tantalisingly clear through the shimmering heat haze, and the dark majestic pyramid of Etna behind it.

It was an Arcadian setting, and the fig-tree domicile gave one a pleasing feeling of kinship with a Biblical patriarch, but reluctant as I was to leave it, I could not avoid seeing that the position here was showing an increasing tendency towards stabilising, and that the plain of Catania was no longer the focal point of the battle. I felt it time also to rejoin Eighth Army headquarters and obtain a fuller picture of the situation as a whole.

Army Headquarters, after a day or two on the Achradina Hill (where once Gylippus had foiled the Athenian attempt to conquer Syracuse, and in doing so had struck the death blow

to their empire) had now moved north to a point near Lentini where it remained until the end of the campaign. Here I found the majority of my colleagues, the representatives of the various British newspapers and of the international News Agencies were now encamped. Only five of us had been able to take part in the original assault landing, four with Eighth Army and one with the American Seventh Army. The remainder had come over just as fast as permission could be obtained for them to land. It was no use trying to come without. General Montgomery had always the strongest views about who might and who might not enter Eighth Army area, and even a couple of Major-Generals who had come over to "take a look at things" were, I believe, summarily about-turned with orders to wait until they were sent for.

But now, after ten days, things were sorting themselves out. Already the occupied portion of Sicily bore every appearance of an area where troops have emphatically come to stay. The mushroom growths of military administration and supply had already established their bases ashore. The military conquests of a week had produced a formidable ribbon development along a country road hitherto fringed only by fields of corn and pasture, groves of olive and vineyards with their promise of autumnal abundance. Already this Arcadian highway was pimpled with innumerable wooden signposts, Eleusinian in their mystery to the uninitiate. Ammunition and petrol dumps were designated by the terse initials A.P. and P.P. respectively, but rations concealed themselves more coyly behind the mystic letters D.I.D. Besides those three great necessities of modern warfare there were lorry-parks and machine workshops, medical dressing stations and field hospitals, transit camps for soldiers proceeding from one sector to another, and already—the most abiding fruit of war—a sprouting of small unpainted wooden crosses surmounting shallow newly-dug mounds, marked only with a name and a number and the name of a regiment.

There were the various unit headquarters: Division, Brigade, Battalion, marked with either a number or some heraldic sign or monogram, the headquarters themselves no more than a scattered congeries of army trucks, each effectively concealed under its green or brown camouflage netting.

It was all very familiar. It did not contribute to the beauty of the countryside, but it was the most eloquent indication of the fact that the invasion was ashore, not merely as a spear-head of combat troops but as a complete and coherent military organisation. Administrative Phase One, the period of the landing, was over; Administrative Phase Two, the "build up," was already well advanced. And presently Phase Three would commence, when luxuries, the extremely relative luxuries of army life, would begin to appear; when there would be Field Cashiers and N.A.A.F.I., perhaps a mobile bath unit (of less importance in summer with the sea at hand than in the mud and chill of a winter campaign), and eventually ENSA.

The fifteen or twenty War Correspondents and the members of the Public Relations unit were camped two or three miles from Lentini. It was a pleasant, well chosen site—an open field from which the hay had been gathered, with a stream of clear running water which was discovered to be *potabile*. Our field was surrounded by low stone walls and bushes of homely blackberries already ripening although July had still more than a week to run. There were convenient trees in the field under which one could pitch one's bed-roll and obtain a modicum of shade, and to which one could affix the indispensable mosquito net. Up in the hills towards Vizzini there had been no question of mosquitoes; here, with Lentini's shallow malarial lake only a mile or two distant, it was a very different matter. There are not many torments worse than tossing sleeplessly from side to side on a broiling summer night a victim to the malice of every passing mosquito. I know it, because I had to endure it for a miserable fortnight in August, 1938, when I was detained at Alicante in Spain on some technical formality, and had to sleep in a hotel which had no mosquito nets in a town totally unprovided with other remedies against the creatures. Only the Providence that watches over fools saved me from being a malarial subject for life.

With the Correspondents, apart from one or two lone wolves, gathered in the same camp for mutual convenience, and with the front now partially stabilised, the normal rhythm of war reporting began to operate. In war a stabilised front breeds

some degree of routine, and although the work of covering a campaign demands a fair amount of mental flexibility, as well as physical endurance, it becomes at certain times and under certain conditions almost as stylised as was the conduct of operations in the days when well-bred French and Austrian commanders practised the "art military" in the convenient proximity of the Netherlands.

Looking back on that Lentini period I see it rather in the light of the "trailer" of a forthcoming film—a series of sharp, rather hectic, disconnected mental pictures. In retrospect they seem to have been strangely intense, tiring, ascetic days. One started the day with the scuttle off in cars and jeeps to the nine o'clock Conference at "Army," "Army" being an aggregation of caravans in another field some two or three miles distant. A youthful Colonel, in civilian life an Oxford history Don and now Chief Intelligence Officer to General Montgomery, would emerge from one of these caravans, nonchalantly but very punctually. The cluster of Correspondents with note-books and maps would swarm round this their particular queen bee. The Colonel would begin to talk, civilised, detached, sophisticated, summarising the events of the previous twenty-four hours. Standing around in the morning sunshine the cluster would scribble rapidly, committing the information in crabbed, cabalistic symbols to the temporary custody of diminutive note-books.

An occasional interruption :

"Excuse me, I didn't quite catch that place-name . . ."

"How far would that be, now, from Palermo?"

"What support troops had Kesselring got in that sector?"

"Excuse me, but *my* map doesn't mark any road there at all."

And once, plaintively, a loud transatlantic wail from the fringe of the cluster :

"Aw, shucks! I cain't hear!"

Back to the jeeps and thence in a frenzied dash to the Press camp once more. An hour of vigorous typewriter-pounding, building the freshly-acquired facts into the background of one's own observation, knowledge and experience; synthesising; endeavouring to interpret; and usually—for there was much to write daily through that swiftly-moving Sicilian campaign—

working feverishly against time. The atmosphere is powerfully evocative of the final half-hour of any public examination, but the examinees sit in an open field in any patch of shade they have been able to find, on any chair, table, crate or packing-case they may temporarily have "acquired"; they employ typewriters; and there is a certain amount of free trade in the exchange of factual information. ("I say, old boy, how many miles from Catania to the crossroads at Palagonia?" . . . "Thanks a lot, and by the way is Twenty-Ninth an *Armoured Division*?" )

But the essential similarities with the examination room are there—high-speed writing, competition and the concentrated attempt to wed matter and style, the search for the appropriate epigram, the convincing "lead."

By eleven we have downed tools with the sigh of achievement that derives from the sense of a piece of creative work, of however humble and transient a nature completed. (War Correspondents are not given to high-falutin talk about the "significance" of their work. They know better.)

Then it is "To horse! To horse!" or its modern equivalent, the jeep. The whole pack (advisedly I substitute the Nimrodian for the horticultural metaphor), the whole pack is off in pursuit of its eye-witness story for the day, its search for its own particular reynard, the focal place and the focal incident of the day's operations. Sometimes the scent is hot and unmistakable, sometimes there is nothing but a day of frustrated feeling and fumbling.

War Correspondents are normally gregarious persons, and they tend to hunt in groups of twos or threes or even fours—which is just as well as there are never enough jeeps or cars available for each man to have his own vehicle. This aggregation of two or more Correspondents on the same sector of the front throughout the day ought to make for a certain lack of variety in the eye-witness reports. I do not think that that is in fact the case. Let four or five men observe the same action throughout the whole of a day and the character of their reportage will vary very greatly in its flavour. In addition to variations due to the necessary capriciousness of individual interpretation, each Correspondent's line of approach will be

conditioned by the character of the organisation by which he is employed. Thus A, who works for a Press Agency, will concentrate on the hard, factual approach; B specialises in the "human angle"; C busily weaves topography, geometry and Clausewitz into a grandiose strategic tapestry; D believes in giving his readers plenty of shot and shell; while E, who represents an American magazine, is required to produce only one story a month on any aspect of the war that he chooses. Lucky E!

Those long bumpy jeep rides to the ever more distant "front" on the upper reaches of the Dittaino or in the country beyond, where the Canadians were working steadily round through the central mountains, first going north and then swinging east towards the flank of the Etna position. The baking Mediterranean sun glared down all day long on the parched battlefield. In my experience a Sicilian summer is every bit as hot as the corresponding season in the desert, though you escape the blinding all-penetrating sandstorms and there is an occasional cooling thunderstorm, very refreshing during a Mediterranean August, but an inconvenience to say the least if you have gone out in the morning leaving your bed-roll, blankets and possessions open and exposed to a cloudless summer sky.

There were visits to units, mugs of tea with battalion commanders, lengthy climbs to points of vantage, observation posts from which one could obtain a *coup d'œil* of the field of operations. There was the discovery (for those who had not already known it) that one battle looks uncommonly like another; shell-bursts look very much the same in whatever country or continent they occur, and three-quarters of any modern battle is an affair of artillery exchanges. The tank break-through and the infantry assault are the things which clinch the operation, but it must be largely through good fortune if you can contrive to be precisely on the spot when these occur. You may march into action with the infantry, but you will not be able to stay with them very long—if you want to get your despatch back in time for the paper of the day after to-morrow. And so, for your picture of a battle, you are largely dependent on hill-tops and similar observation posts, save in those delirious moments when the enemy breaks and the whole army sweeps forward into the



unknown. I have known such moments in Africa, and the peculiar exhilaration which they engender is something to which I know no parallel in the whole range of human experience. Driving into an orange winter sunset when the enemy melted away before us at Gazala; an evening in the Tunisian spring when the Lancers—they rode in tanks—broke through the pass at Fondouk and three of us drove as hard as we could go along the road after them, through meadows carpeted with wild flowers towards the sacred city of Kairouan. I do not know whether the strange joy that overcomes one on such occasions should be regarded as sacred or profane; I know that like all such joys it comes unbidden and unearned; I know that it is a deep enrichment to the soul.

But the present time of which I write—the “middle period” of Sicily—was not a time of such experiences. It was rather a time of honest slogging, the straightforward frontal attacks, as it were, of war reporting. Those long jeep drives, six or seven hours a day, much of the time over semi-existent roads, remain etched in my memory. So also do the hasty roadside lunches, picnic lunches one should call them, I suppose, though there was little of the festive quality attached to them. All the three staples: biscuits, bully beef and sardines pall in time. Army biscuits tend to remind one, a trifle too emphatically, of one’s kinship with the lower forms of creation. The indignant biblical protest, “Is thy servant a dog?”, takes on a new significance, and one is reminded of Virginia Woolf’s comment on the biscuits served her at lunch at a woman’s college at Cambridge. (“Biscuits and cheese followed, and with these the water-jug was freely passed about; for it is the nature of biscuits to be dry, and these were biscuits to the core.”) Bully beef has its enemies and denigrators, of whom I am not one though their name is legion, but the contents of a tin opened on a hot day are apt to wear a peculiarly corpse-like aspect. And when one has, perhaps only a quarter of an hour since, been in the visual presence of death in its less pleasant forms . . . As for sardines, their oiliness, though not repulsive to the palate, is not, on an excessively hot day, attractive to the eye.

And so we eked out these hasty improvised lunches with

hunks of cheese and tinned fruit, when we could obtain it, and the rough red wine of the country.

Six hours driving in a jeep in a hot sun is as good a cure as I know for insomnia, but the story of the day—one's own personal eye-witness angle—had to be written. Sometimes, though not frequently, one felt reserves of mental alertness sufficient to enable one to write immediately upon arriving back at camp. That done, one could eat one's evening meal with the clearest of consciences and crawl in to sleep the sleep of the smugly just under one's mosquito net. More often it would be too late and too dark to start writing out of doors; after one's alfresco dinner it would then be possible to carry one's typewriter up to a farmhouse half a mile distant and there, by the guttering light of a couple of candles, one might, by the courtesy of the good woman of the house (wondering what strange wild fowl the heavens had blown in upon her), tap out the day's events. It was not to be recommended. The despatch written in extreme physical weariness is seldom one which does justice to its topic; others may disagree on this point, but that has been my own experience. For a "colour piece" richly charged with emotional content . . . perhaps but even then the purple passages so engendered are liable to tend towards the florid or the sentimental—passages which, in the morning, *legimus cacantes*.

No; it was best, on the whole, to leave the day's story to simmer overnight, to sit down at the long table, "acquired" from God knows where, to a pastoral meal with the mess waiters popping in and out of the bushes behind the table where our field kitchen was established. That evening meal under the stars never failed to remind me of the outlaws' banquet in "As You Like It." That in turn led me by a natural process to toy childishly in a "private world" casting of my colleagues as characters in that play. (But it was not very satisfactory, for there were too many Amiens and not enough of anyone else; it was really much easier to find them in "Henry IV, Part One.")

And so one would sleep on one's story, and waking early in the morning (for it was light at five) alert and refreshed would find that the threads of yesterday's memories had begun to

arrange themselves into some degree of significant shape. Then one took one's typewriter and rattled away until the approach of breakfast . . . And then it was time for the nine o'clock Conference . . .

Another of our yesterdays . . .

## V. Nemesis of a Dictator

IT had taken no more than three days to convince most of us who were of, or with, the British and American troops in Sicily that the Italian Army could be virtually written off so far as serious opposition was concerned. It appears that it took Mussolini no longer to arrive at the same conclusion.

It would be interesting to know when Mussolini first decided that as far as Italy was concerned the game was up. Italians to whom I have spoken in the period immediately following the September armistice usually told me that it was the series of air bombardments of their ports and cities during the weeks and months immediately following Alamein that really convinced the people that their own war was lost. Stalingrad persuaded them that Germany, too, in all probability, was now on the downward grade.

But, for the private citizen, there is a wide chasm between the realisation that defeat is inevitable, the desire that one's country shall extricate itself as speedily as possible from war, and the readiness to make personal sacrifices, run personal risks in order to achieve this object.

Fascism never had quite the boa-constrictor grip on the very soul of the individual in Italy that Nazism imposed in Germany. Mussolini's secret police compared unequally in general diabolism with the Gestapo, and there was never quite the same zest for private betrayals and denunciations among the Italians which forms so unlovely a feature of the German character. Consequently, the continued Italian ill success in the conduct of the war, which again and again displayed the ineptitude of the Fascist organisation to make a success of that form of

achievement in which it had boasted itself supreme, roused increasing and persistent criticism of the régime. From April onwards, under pressure of the African defeats, hostile comment and hostile pamphleteering were quite open and unconcealed. The point at issue now was not whether it was desirable that Mussolini and his system should go, but simply the best means of securing this desirable result.

But it was here that the palpable weakness of the opponents of Fascism betrayed itself. Leaders of Italian Liberalism, twenty years submerged, were now coming to the surface once more, all too often, alas, mere historic survivals of a party and a creed which had once stirred Europe profoundly, which had once given life to nations, but which now could no longer recover its lost spell. I have heard these Italian Liberals described as "decrepit mummies," "museum pieces" and so forth by younger and more revolutionary-minded opponents of Fascism, and there was some truth in the taunt, brutal as it was when directed against men who had for nearly a quarter of a century maintained their political integrity in the face of all inducements to the contrary.

But the fact remained that, although the entire country and its Shadow Cabinet urgently wanted peace and the overthrow of the existing régime, no one was prepared for the hazardous task of belling the cat. Meetings were held, there was much coming and going, an atmosphere of pleasant anticipation prevailed, but always the decision at any such meetings was the same: the time for direct action had not yet arrived.

And while these worthy but elderly Brutuses temporised, the march of events overtook them; Fascism toppled and fell, crumbling in its own rottenness and manifest inefficiency.

After Tunisia the ground was trembling under Mussolini's feet. There was an attempt to whip up the party to a more whole-hearted co-operation with Germany, and Carlo Scorza was appointed secretary to the party, as the man most likely to enforce this policy on the back-sliders. At the same time a fresh poster campaign accompanied by flamboyant appeals of the "Hannibal is at the gates" type were made with a view to stirring the population out of its singularly unbellicose apathy.

constitutional right to dismiss the head of the Government without the latter's consent. Constitutional legality was, it appeared to be, the unexpected last ditch in which he intended to defy his accusers. But the King had been visited by Grandi and Ciano even earlier that morning, and had been given an adequate picture of the strength of feeling that prevailed against the Dictator. He repeated his request. Mussolini left the palace with his mind still undecided. But his enemies, who had possibly studied the technique by which Robespierre had been overthrown, were leaving nothing to chance. An ambulance was waiting outside the royal palace, and into this Mussolini was unceremoniously bundled. He was then driven off into captivity while the King promptly sent for Marshal Badoglio and entrusted him with the task of forming a Government and by some means or other extricating the country from its unhappy plight.

The news of the overthrow of Mussolini spread rapidly through the capital. Everywhere in Rome, everywhere in Italy there was rejoicing. Nowhere was there any counter-demonstration of the least significance, not even among those groups of hardened Fascists whose fortunes were inextricably bound up with the late régime. The strength of popular feeling was too great to have permitted anything of the sort. Fascism fell to the ground almost as much through the internal dry rot that had been sapping it for years as through the pressure of external military circumstance. It died because it had lost belief in itself. And the subsequent bastard production "Republican Fascism," which was reimposed with the release of Mussolini some weeks later, was still-born from the first.

They took Mussolini first of all to Ponza, an island lying well out to sea off the west coast of Italy. Before he left Rome the Duce had been brought sufficiently low to write a letter of thanks to his successor, Badoglio, personally thanking him for the protection which he had received against the hostility of the people which might, he said, have been fatal to him.

It is difficult to recall, in all history, a more total and humiliating self-abasement by the ruler of an empire. It was not thus that Mark Antony and the Imperial Romans, with whom Mussolini

in the vulgarity of his soul had liked to compare himself, had passed from the stage.

Ponza lies well out to sea off the west coast of Italy. It looks on the map admirably placed for the execution of a commando raid which might have transferred the ex-Duc  into surer hands than those of Badoglio's guards. Perhaps such a thought was not wholly absent from the mind of the new Italian Prime Minister when he decided upon this place of durance for Mussolini. But the British showed their customary embarrassment when faced with the prospective custody of one of their national enemies.\* Alternatively, it may have been felt that the capture of Mussolini was not worth the life of a single British soldier. This I believe to have been a miscalculation. The Duc , though hopelessly discredited, was still a potential trump card, a very small trump now but still a trump, if he were ever rescued by the Germans. With Mussolini at "liberty" it was still possible, as we saw in September, to establish once more at any rate the fa ade of Fascism in northern Italy. The name gave a certain measure of continuity. Without Mussolini, I do not think it would have been possible. And therefore the assistance, grudging and limited as it is, which certain elements gave to the Germans throughout the winter of 1943-44 is to some extent the result of our failure to snatch the opportunity that presented itself.

But it has to be admitted that at the end of July, 1943, it was beginning to look as though we should not have to bother about a Nazi puppet ruler anywhere in Italy south of the Po.

Presumably fearing just such a German *coup* as subsequently occurred, the Italian Government kept shifting their embarrassing captive from one place of confinement to another. From Ponza he was taken to the island of Maddalena just off the northern shore of Sardinia, and thence to the clinic of Campo Imperatore in the Abruzzi mountains of central Italy. During this period the ex-Duc  seemed to have abandoned his political interest. He was a very sick man, suffering from stomach ulcers and heart trouble, and in a letter to his sister, written from his clinic in the Abruzzi, he confided the startling and piquant

\* I hold the case of Rudolf Hess to be the exception rather than the rule.

information that he "would probably dedicate the remainder of his life to the church."

But an ecclesiastical career was not destined to be the final lot of the Fascist King Lear. For his Earl of Kent was at hand with other ideas on the matter. On the morning of Wednesday, September 8, German airborne troops were dropped in some numbers on the hillside around the clinic in the Abruzzi where Mussolini was confined. The Italian guards appear to have been caught napping; some German parachutists were able to establish a machine-gun on the roof of the building to command the exist while others succeeded in making an entry through the cellars. A number of carabinieri, who emerged from the hotel with machine-guns, were confronted by a single S.S. officer who ordered them to lay down their arms. They meekly obeyed.

At that moment the unmistakable profile of the Dúcē appeared at a second-floor window.

"Don't shoot!" yelled the S.S. officer to his men, who were apparently itching for an opportunity to shoot someone, no matter whom. No time was wasted; the officer explained to Mussolini that he had come to set him free from his captivity and bring him to a place where he would be in security behind the German lines.

"I guessed it," said Mussolini. "I never doubted that the Führer would do everything to get me out of here."

He was told that the Badoglio Government had just signed an armistice with the Allies, whereupon, in the words of an eye-witness, the Dúcē was seen to "tremble with fury."

Then the ex-Dictator was bundled into a Fiesoler Storch airplane and was flown off to join his master. The *opéra bouffe* was over. Mussolini's Elba had been inglorious enough, but his Hundred Days lacked any shadow of the quality of the Napoleonic epic. For the Emperor of the Mediterranean had merely exchanged the rôle of captive of his own people for that of captive of another.

The British do not take kindly to propaganda, and are slow to recognise the inherent possibilities of a new development.

It is not otherwise possible to explain the extraordinary failure of our Amgot officials to capitalise the fall of Mussolini. The day that the news broke (we did not officially hear of it until July 26) I drove into the neighbouring town of Lentini just before seven o'clock in the evening to hear the British commentary on the situation. Every evening at seven o'clock the war news was broadcast by means of a loud-speaker from the Town Hall which formed one side of the main square. It was a social event, *the* social event of the day in Lentini, and on these warm summer evenings the bulk of the population were in the habit of gathering in the square or sitting at the little café tables. That Monday evening there was an atmosphere of pleasant expectancy. The people knew the fact of Mussolini's fall, but they knew no details or only those which arrived on the wings of rumour. But the British would set all that right, the British could be relied upon to give the full story. And very much as theatre-goers await the rising of the curtain, the good people of Lentini awaited the evening's news bulletin.

The atmosphere was tense and expectant. We had the news and the people were ready to hear it with whatever comments or deductions the speaker might choose to savour it. They were quite ready for that; they expected it; they wanted it. They were ripe to hear that the man who had been indicted by Churchill in his broadcast to the Italian people nearly three years earlier as the "one man, the one man alone" who had dragged his country into an unwanted war and brought her under the domination of Germany, had gone down into the shades.

That was what they were ready to hear. And to welcome. What they got was an almost perfect textbook example of how not to do it.

The news bulletin was twenty minutes late in starting. That was bad enough, and it could scarcely be attributed to the necessity of recasting the entire bulletin since the British authorities had been in possession of the news for at least twelve hours.

The loud-speaker began to croak—it was speaking in English—that the town of Lentini was out of bounds to British troops;



it repeated the information in Italian. One could not help feeling that on such a night as this the customary ban might have been raised. Surely, if ever, it was a night when Saturnalia, the old full-blooded Roman Saturnalia, would have been justified. But one stifled down this impious hope and strained for the news, the real news.

We got it.

"In the plain of Catania," began the announcer, "German resistance continues tenaciously."

We gasped.

The greatest event in modern Italian history had just occurred. In every town in Sicily the people had gathered to hear the British account of the fall of Mussolini, the British comment on the *débâcle* of Fascism, and they were told of tenacious resistance in the plain of Catania! Just that!

Three or four more items of news from the Sicilian front followed, and then the bald announcement that the "head of the Government, Benito Mussolini, had resigned and had been succeeded by Marshal Badoglio." There followed two or three minutes of press comment of a not very electrifying nature from the London dailies. And that was all. The announcer, no doubt with a genuine sensation of a good job of work well done, passed on to other items, and the people were left to make what they could of that.

I imagine that it would be difficult to parallel the inept handling of this incalculably significant news with anything that had previously occurred in the course of the war. The listeners reacted like a pricked balloon. There was not a single round of applause, not a solitary hand-clap, just a collective visible shrug of the shoulders. They were, in a sense, satisfied, but they were quite markedly undemonstrative. And when Italians receive news of capital importance without demonstration then there is something very wrong in the handling of the news.

Furious with mortification I sought out the nearest Amgot officer. He looked like Groucho Marx, and I learned subsequently that he had been responsible for the shaping of that evening's bulletin and was rather proud of it. I had one of my rare but thorough bursts of rudeness. I told him that

calculated under-statement (giving him credit for that degree of intelligence) might be all very well for the British public who appreciate such things, but that for a Mediterranean people, who expect an important announcement to be made with a certain degree of *éclat*, it was disastrous. I asked him whether it was proposed that "*Deutschland uber Alles*" should be played in the town square on the following night.

In fact I was thoroughly offensive. But he didn't see it, and he wouldn't have seen it if I had argued and abused for an hour.

And so I stumped off to join my colleagues and retail to them the latest masterpiece of Britain's "psychological warfare." Several of us wrote pieces that night commenting more or less acidly on the handling of the news in Lentini.

We need not have troubled. They were not allowed to pass the censors.

## VI.

## Centuripe

THE crossing of the Simeto had been forced, but the Allied command had decided against pushing matters to a conclusion in the Gerbini plain in the days that followed. Accordingly the centre of gravity during the next week or two shifted inland, as General Alexander swung his British and American Divisions through the centre of the island and along the north coast towards the Etna bastion. For the next fortnight the Allied advance resembled the movement of a door that swings open on its hinges, with the minimum movement at the hinge itself, the maximum at the further end. The Catania plain was the hinge and the door was swinging open from the west towards the north-west and north. While Fiftieth and Fifth Divisions faced the Germans in the plain on the eastern flank, the running was taken up by the Highland Division, the Malta Brigade, the Canadians and the American Divisions now advancing rapidly upon Palermo.

The first attempt was made quite close to the hinge. Held up in the main advance towards Catania from the south, General Montgomery attempted to push the Highland Division into the Gerbini plain from the west and, by seizing Paterno and the villages on the southern fringe of the Etna massif, to compel the evacuation of Catania. At first it looked as if they were going to succeed. By the beginning of the second week of the invasion they had taken Palagonia and Ramacca and were moving across the Dittaino.

On the night of July 20, the Highlanders attacked across the river, pushing through a country of orchards and olive groves which gave first-class cover both to the advancing troops and also to the machine-gun nests of the defenders. They went forward two miles, and then, just in time, the Germans held them. They rushed up armoured cars and tanks, they drove infantry in lorries straight on to the battlefield itself under direct fire of our field guns; they used the guns of their derelict tanks as miniature redoubts, as they had so often done in the desert. And finally, in the grey light of dawn, their infantry, slipping in groups of twos and threes among the closely-planted olive groves, began to infiltrate into our positions.

It is just about the most trying and nerve-racking experience which a soldier can meet with in battle to find, after he has fought all night and the intense languor that comes with dawn settles down upon him, that little groups of enemy have slipped in between one platoon and its neighbour and are firing upon him from the rear. That was what the Highlanders had to face that morning. They wiped out most of them, and after that it was just cat and dog, the infantry of both sides keeping their heads down and burrowing for cover among the fruit trees, while the artillery indulged in twenty minute "stonks" against the presumed enemy positions.

If you read military textbooks, you find that for an army to have its line of communications parallel to, or in prolongation of, its battle front is—to say the least—undesirable. But if you want to know why, just drive along a road that fulfils those textbook conditions. That's what I did in order to get to the Highlanders that afternoon. The road at places was only three-

quarters of a mile from the German front and ran continuously parallel to it. The Germans realised perfectly well that this was the one line of supply for the Highland Division, and they were shelling it with some regularity. The road was pitted with shell holes and littered with derelict vehicles with here and there a corpse sprawled grotesquely half in and half out of his car. Uprooted telegraph posts and twisted wires added a footnote to the general atmosphere of destruction. There was one particularly unpleasant cross roads on which the German guns had been ranging with considerable accuracy. Vehicles were still burning around it.

"Can we get past there?" I asked an ambulance man by the roadside.

"Well," he replied, "you just back your luck. Drive fast across it and hope for the best."

We drove very fast indeed.

Beyond the cross roads I ran my jeep in under the shelter of some trees and stumped off on foot through the orchards towards our front line. I found Battalion Headquarters in a farm-house. Exhausted men, who had just come out of the line, were squatting outside, propped against the wall in that queer sort of coma which comes upon soldiers when they have fought themselves to a standstill. The Battalion Commander himself was unshaven and almost reeling with weariness. He talked with long pauses between his sentences as though trying to focus his exhausted mind on the subject. The enemy had got his troops up just in time. Another few hours and we should have been swarming over the Gerbini airfields. As it was, we had made them unusable for the enemy. Despite their counter-attack we had gained on the balance along the Brigade front a depth of from half to three-quarters of a mile. We had taken one hundred and fifty prisoners, all Germans, and inflicted considerable casualties on the enemy though probably suffering as heavily ourselves. That was the sum total of the day's operations in that sector.

I felt a sinking of my heart. It sounded so terribly reminiscent of 1916, of war fought in terms of advance of a few hundred yards over shell-torn ground, every yard purchased with a man's life. There had been so little of this in Africa, where battles

had had the swift, decisive quality of the sword thrust in a duel. I thought of Italy, to the invasion of which we were already almost certainly committed. I thought of the bony spine running all the way up the peninsula, and even at that early date (it was July 21) I felt a sickening foreboding of what was to come. We were held on this front, just as we were held in front of Prima Sole.

But inland things were moving very fast indeed, because there was very little opposition. The Germans were pulling back towards their Etna bastion with the Fifteenth Panzer Grenadiers in the centre and the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division on the north coast, while Hermann Goering—a very fine Division—held us in the Catania and Gerbini plains.

In the very centre of the island, perched on the summit of a cone-shaped peak, stood the town of Enna. According to classical tradition it was the most ancient city in the world—it lies at almost the exact geometrical centre of the island—and was reputedly the birthplace of Proserpine. It would have been almost impossible to carry it by frontal assault, and accordingly the Canadians had received orders to by-pass it. But, astonishingly, the Germans, who could have constituted a considerable nuisance by simply staying put, quietly pulled out of the town and on the morning of July 20 the Americans entered the town without serious opposition. Two days later their troops at the further end of the island pushed through to the north coast and entered the capital, Palermo. That meant the end of all serious resistance in the west. By this time the Italians were simply surrendering in droves to anyone who could spare the time or the trouble to capture them, and it was pretty clear that the only further resistance in the island would come from the three German Divisions.

The centre of gravity had now shifted further inland from the hinge to the Canadians working up through the centre of the island. I wanted to see Enna and I wanted to visit the Canadians, and so, combining war corresponding with tourism, not for the first or last time, I drove off inland.

The country was burned to a uniform golden brown and the blazing July sun beat down remorselessly upon us, but the

three of us (John Redfern of the *Daily Express*, James MacDowell of the *Daily Sketch* and myself) all felt in a strangely holiday mood. Looking back, I am surprised that we worried so little about the possibility of enemy parachutists or *francs tireurs*. Only two or three days earlier the enemy had, in fact, dropped a number of parachutists at various points behind our lines. They were all Italians, and most of them in plain clothes. They had appeared to have very little idea of what they were supposed to do. They didn't know why they had been dropped, they didn't know what objectives they were supposed to make for, many of them didn't even know where they were. They had been told that they would receive instructions when they landed, but there was no one there to instruct them and so they just wandered about unhappily until someone took charge of them and shepherded them to the nearest prison cage.

And so, with a hundred evidences of the complete absence of bellicosity on the part of the Italians, soldiers and civilians alike, we drove off towards Enna without a care in the world. With that strange uplift of spirit that takes control of one in hill country I found myself mentally chanting all the pastoral poetry I had ever known. The sheep browsing contentedly in the fields, the occasional shepherd with his courtly and dignified salutation, so refreshingly different from the cringing ingratiating townsmen, were pure Theocritus. A lovely couplet kept recurring in my head :

"I will sing among these rocks with my arms about you gazing  
At our flocks together grazing and the sea of Sicily."

The war seemed a very long way away just then.

I was brought back to earth by the question of lunch. I have discussed those roadside lunches before, the inevitable unvarying choice : bully or sardines, sardines or bully, "washed down," as they say, by draughts of more than tepid water from one's water bottles. From that point, by easy transition, we drifted on to the topic of food and discussed our ideal meals. It is one of the pleasantest pastimes I know. I believe salmon mayonnaise and strawberries and cream and cider cup formed

the basis of my dream meal as I contemplated without enthusiasm the sleek oiliness of the sardines and the peculiarly corpse-like appearance of the bully.

Those long jeep drives that form so immense a part of a War Correspondent's day, what strange conversations they give birth to. Within a hour or two John Redfern and I were eagerly, almost passionately, discussing forms of Church Government. *A priori*, one would not expect to find a keen theologian under the skin of a *Daily Express* reporter, but then John is less like the hard-boiled newspaper man of fiction than anyone I have ever met, and none the worse a Correspondent for that. In fact, comparatively few War Correspondents resemble the typical reporter of fiction or film. Generally, in my experience, they are sensitive, diffident, self-critical, easily discouraged. That makes them, in many ways, all the better as reporters. The reporter who loses his sensibility or, through success, loses his powers of self-criticism forfeits two-thirds of his value as a reporter. One of the most famous foreign Correspondents of our day, Webb Miller, in his autobiography, "I Found No Peace," describes his intense nervousness before an interview, his pathological belief that everyone he met disliked and despised him. (Oddly enough Rupert Brooke, of all people, once confessed to the same queer obsession.) Evelyn Montague, of the *Manchester Guardian*, once told me that when he was sent for the first time to interview a celebrity he paced up and down the road in front of the house he was to visit for two hours, and then returned to his Editor with the words, "I can't do it!"

And so we discussed the niceties of ecclesiastical organisation as we bowled up the mountain roads towards the city of Demeter, the Corn Goddess. It was a piquantly inappropriate topic.

Enna was everything I had dreamed of. The peak on which it stands rises so abruptly above the rolling hills that surround it that it was not difficult to imagine how legends had grown up around the place. It was positively numinous, and I felt that if only it had been possible to stay there two or three days I could have added to the legend cycle myself. A part of the town had suffered pretty severely from bombing, but as elsewhere in Sicily the people seemed to bear us no particular

malice and we were kindly received at the principal hotel. I hadn't slept in a bed since landing in Sicily, and the temptation to stop at Enna was very strong, but meanwhile the Canadians, we knew, were mounting an attack for the following day and we had to drive on and make contact with them.

I suppose that the average newspaper reader is tolerably familiar with the word "demolitions." I will go further and assume that he is thoroughly sick of the word. But he can't be quite so sick of it as those of us who have followed a retreating German Army from Alamein to Tunis and then from Syracuse to Cassino, in the sure and certain knowledge that every bridge ahead of us (and road bridges in Sicily and southern Italy are very numerous) would be demolished. In the desert that didn't matter much: the gulleys were normally quite shallow, and when you came up against an obstacle of that nature you could quite frequently just drive round it, for there were no hedges or walls in the desert, and the rough gravel surface would always bear a jeep. But here in Sicily it was quite another matter. If a bridge across a river or gully was destroyed you might easily have to make a detour of twenty miles or more. That happened to us that same evening on our way from Enna to Canadian Headquarters near Leonforte. A bridge had been destroyed on our route, and the deviation which was involved was enormous. The river was narrow enough for us to have tossed a stone across on to the other bank, but it took us three and a half hours along winding dusty roads before we could arrive at the point on the opposite bank where our road continued. That is the sort of thing you have to accept philosophically, but it becomes maddening when you are racing with despatches against time. It may result in one being an entire day behind with the news, which in turn is liable to produce a chilly cable from one's Editor. However, it didn't matter that day, and we reached Canadian Divisional Headquarters not very long after nightfall.

It's platitudinous, I suppose, to remark that "Colonials" show a more open and hospitable attitude to strangers than does the typical Englishman, if there is such a thing. The Canadians represented the end of a process which I had seen



developing with regard to War Correspondents for more than two years. In the desert the attitude of many of the Eighth Army Intelligence Officers had at the start been frankly suspicious where the Press were concerned, though in fact all of us numbered good friends among them. Almost insensibly one grew accustomed to being regarded as a cross between a particularly virulent Fifth Columnist and an abnormally tiresome "problem" child. From the first there were certain marked exceptions among the Intelligence Officers, very notably Major (now Brigadier) E. T. Williams at Eighth Army and Major F. H. De Butts at Thirteenth Corps. They were invariably helpful. How familiar one became with the suspicious regard and the grudging remark, "Well, I don't know that I'm supposed to tell you fellows anything." How tired, too, of the query, "Look here, does anyone censor your stuff?" Patiently one used to explain that our "stuff" passed through a military censor, a R.A.F. censor and, if necessary, a Naval censor and a political censor as well. And gradually, though there were a few unfortunate lapses, we broke down this attitude of suspicion. Occasionally one had to combat gentlemen such as the officer at Eighth Army Headquarters at the time of Alamein, who told his Intelligence Officers that "they need not concern themselves with people running round and trying to get stories"—which was not perhaps the most tactful method of handling the Press. As I say, the attitude towards the Press in Eighth Army gradually improved, but it was always an established principle that, while we might see Intelligence Maps (i.e. maps showing the dispositions and movements of enemy troops) under no circumstances whatever were we entitled to see Operational Maps (which dealt with the similar movements of our own troops). Actually the more friendly I.O.'s usually contrived that we should see them, but the principle remained in force.

In the First Army a very different attitude had prevailed. Whether it was the fact of having been so much longer in England and having seen the way in which the Eighth Army had grown to fame, they were fully press-minded and, without exception, exceedingly helpful. One received the fullest access to the information at their disposal. With the Canadians I found the

process carried one stage further. They not merely supplied all the information you wanted ; they went to the greatest pains to find individuals to amplify the bare bones of fact. It was most refreshing.

I am convinced that this is the right method of handling War Correspondents. Select them carefully, give them the fullest information, show that you trust them, and they will not let you down. On the other hand, in the event of any proved breach of security, retribution should be more thorough and more drastic than it normally is. The real trouble is that there are far too many War Correspondents ; they are selected without any examination into their capacity to report a war competently or intelligently, and consequently there is too much irresponsible reporting. And presumably because the War Office wishes to avoid a clash with some of the big news organisations, there is no doubt that Correspondents have been able to get away with information that should never have been published. The fierce competitiveness of the big news agencies, with their tendency to subordinate everything to speed, has been the prime factor which has produced this situation. Even among the large number of accredited War Correspondents, probably seventeen out of every twenty are fully responsible persons, generally capable of voluntarily censoring their own copy, but it is the remaining three who bring the whole body into disrepute.

The Canadian attack towards Agira, which started on the afternoon of July 24, was the first of a series of hammer blows by which the Canadians fought their way eastwards from the neighbourhood of Leonforte towards Etna. Essentially each operation followed much the same pattern. The enemy were normally established with an adequate supply of defensive weapons against infantry or tanks in the neighbourhood of the villages along the Agira-Regalbuto-Adrano road.

There was a preliminary pasting of the target by the Tactical Air Force ; then followed the preliminary artillery bombardment, a legacy from Alamein, and then the infantry went forward, in Bren carriers over the first part of the advance, and on their feet over the last stage. Where the terrain permitted they were

supported by tanks, following close behind and adopting the rôle of light mobile field artillery. In Sicily, and afterwards in Italy, the Sherman tank was exclusively employed. It had a good record in the desert war; at Alamein, where it made its first appearance, it decisively out-fought the German Mark IV. But I have heard many experienced tank men argue that the Churchill, which did so well in the mountain fighting in Tunisia, would have been a more effective tank in Sicily and southern Italy. The six-pounder which the Churchill carries has not so long a range as the 75 mm. of the Sherman, but in mountain country where you do not get the wide open expanses of the desert that matters less; moreover, the Churchill is decidedly a better climber in hilly country than the Sherman. It was a nice point, but I do not feel convinced that the absence of Churchill tanks throughout the campaign was wholly justified.

All that afternoon I lay on the summit of a crag above the village of Assoro looking down on the road that leads towards Agira and watching through binoculars the Canadian tanks, armoured cars and infantry mustering for the attack. They were hidden from enemy observation by the shoulder of the hill on which I lay. By casting my eyes a few degrees to the right I could see the village of Nissoria, which was the most forward point of the enemy defences. It gives one a strange, God's-eye view to be able to cast an impartial eye on attacker and attacked alike.

There was no sign of motion from the German positions. Their very stillness had a somewhat eerie and sinister quality, and as zero hour for the attack approached, that strange hush with which one becomes so familiar on these occasions, descended on the battlefield. On this occasion there was no preliminary pasting from the air, and the first intimation of the approaching attack was the whine of a single shell overhead ten minutes before zero hour. That was the first ranging shot on the enemy positions. Then shell followed shell with gathering intensity as our guns concentrated against the German positions. And meanwhile, among the trees and hollows some hundreds of feet below me, the armoured vehicles of the Canadians were creeping into position, the infantry moving up along the road

in single file, keeping to the margin on each side. That was a simple precaution which I had learned in Africa when going forward with an advance along a road. You keep well into the side of the road to make the most of whatever cover is afforded by hedge or ditch or wall; besides, there are more likely to be mines in the middle of the track.

Below me the infantry filed on and passed out of sight under the shoulder of the hill, patient plodding figures going dumbly forward towards that silent grey village two or three miles ahead that would spring to life with mortar and machine-gun as they approached. In an hour or so many of them would be dead, and they knew it. They just went fatalistically forward, because it was the only thing they could do. The whole purpose and significance of their lives was pin-pointed on the necessity of walking up to an obscure Sicilian village, arriving there alive, if possible, and killing any Germans they might find there. Battle is like a ghastly form of mountaineering in the sense that death is omnipresent; it is a matter of inches to left or right, but at the same time there is the curious elimination of all other worries. The soldier going into battle does not, I think, find himself worrying about unpaid bills or nagging wives or even hectoring Sergeant-Majors, and that is some consolation.

After the infantry and the armoured cars disappeared from sight the battle, like all battles from the spectator's point of view, became an affair of piecing together the bricks of observation with the cement of deduction and speculation. I could see our shell-bursts moving further and further eastward in a creeping barrage. Now dirty white blossoms of smoke were arising from Nissoria; now they were breaking out on the slopes beyond. Nearer at hand a thick, opaque cloud of smoke screened the advance of our infantry. There was very little enemy counter-fire, but that might mean any one of three things. It might mean that the enemy commander had quietly pulled back the bulk of his forces, leaving us to waste our effort on an almost abandoned position; such a manœuvre had been a familiar practice in the course of the long retreat from Alamein to Tunisia the previous winter, and at about this stage of the war

some of us had grown so accustomed to this technique that we had come to believe that the Germans would pursue this method of sudden and silent withdrawal at the very moment when our attack was about to break, all the way back to the Brenner. How wrong we were! Alternatively, the enemy might be genuinely short of ammunition, since it could not be easy to convey it in large quantities to these improvised mountain positions. Most probably, however, he was simply holding his fire until our infantry advanced to close quarters. In Sicily, as in the campaigns that preceded and followed it, the Germans were rather markedly weak in field artillery, since they had never calculated on a long war of exhaustion, in which field artillery comes into its own; on the other hand, they have always been adequately supplied with infantry weapons, and their heavy machine-guns and 4-inch mortars are probably better than any corresponding weapons which we possess. The Germans started the war relying on a superiority in tanks and aircraft to bring them decisive victory. When these failed them, after the brilliant successes of the first months of war, they began to speed up the production of defensive infantry weapons and to develop defensive infantry tactics. The more ponderous working of the British military mind was usually at least one jump behind the Germans in tactical theory, with the result that we were still relying on the tank as a sort of Open Sesame! in country where the tank could not possibly achieve decisive success. We should have done better by relating our tactics to our long-term strategy, to have started at an early stage training an adequate number of troops for mountain warfare. Even now we have a lot to learn from the Greeks in that respect.

Suddenly I heard below me the quick rattle of machine-gun fire sounding not unlike the distant clatter of numerous typewriters. That meant that the Canadian infantry were getting to close quarters with their opponents. Then that, too, died away. I came down the hillside and learnt that the infantry had fought their way through their first objective, the village of Nissoria. Our barrage continued to lengthen and shells began bursting among parked German transport in a field of golden corn that climbed up the hillside towards the horizon.

An enemy vehicle burst into flames—a splash of brilliant red emitting jet upon jet of thick oily black clouds against a background of pale gold.

Then there was a lull, a lull that began as abruptly and seemed as capricious and unmeaning as so much else in war. In fact, what had happened was that the impetus of the Canadian attack had temporarily spent itself; having carried their first objective they now found themselves, as the sun slunk down behind the hills, facing fresh demolitions and fresh minefields. A halt had to be called for the units to re-group; for that happens in war; the force of the offensive diminishes, tactically in a matter of hours, strategically, as a rule, after a few days. It is only when circumstances are peculiarly favourable, when a break-through has been shatteringly complete, that an army gains momentum and impetus as it advances. It happened in the Battle of France in 1940; it happened during the last days of the Tunisian campaign. It happened subsequently in the advance beyond the Rhine in the spring of 1945.

And so Nissoria was won. The first of several enemy positions carried by sledge-hammer frontal assault during the next ten days or so. Stubbornly the Canadians fought their way eastwards towards Etna. Each operation tended to be a repetition of its predecessor, and the preliminary bombardment from the air grew heavier and heavier. Villages like Regalbuto, and later Randazzo, were blotted out by bombing from the air on a scale unprecedented in the history of war. With the march of progress we managed to improve on our efforts of July, 1943, during the following year. I suppose that Regalbuto would look almost neat and tidy beside some of the towns and villages of northern France, but it seemed messy enough at the time.

This use of our overwhelming air superiority to remove one tactical objective after another was the subject of a good deal of controversy in the course of the campaign. It had seemed the quickest, surest way of breaking down the resistance of enemy strong-points, but there were certain arguments to be advanced against it. One need not enter into the humanitarian aspect of the case. War is hell, as General Sherman discovered nearly a century ago; a nation having once committed itself to war is

likely to find that a renunciation of "total" methods will not in fact hasten the end of the war; it is more likely to prolong it. But there was a case against this use of air power. The best air commentator known to me has consistently maintained throughout the war that the proper offensive function of air power is strategic, and that any bomber diverted to a tactical operation represents a loss to a long-term major objective in favour of a short-term minor one.

Again, though the villages which we bombed in this drastic manner were normally situated on heights dominating the surrounding countryside, the Germans as a rule seldom established their defensive positions in the villages themselves, but normally a short distance to the rear. That meant that these bombings, though they frequently killed large numbers of Italian civilians, as a rule did no harm to the German soldiers. Secondly, and still more important, our objective, which was to block the roads with rubble and render the retreat of German wheeled vehicles impracticable, was largely frustrated because it was not necessary for the Germans to retreat through the villages. Instead we found that when our troops entered these places they had to spend hours clearing away the rubble in order to continue the advance. Our own bombing was piling up obstacles in the way of the advance of our ground forces. Nor was the occupation of these villages eased by the necessity for coping with the scores of homeless inhabitants and the hundreds of dead and wounded civilians. The danger of the rapid spread of disease under those conditions was a very real one.

There was a period when the military authorities tried the experiment of dispensing with the preliminary air attack. But they soon reverted to it, since they found that the work previously done by their bombers was almost as effectively carried out by the Germans before they retreated, since by this stage of the war the latter cared less than nothing for the sufferings of Italian civilians. And there the matter rested.

Stage by stage the Canadians nibbled their way forward. They had taken Nissoria on July 24, they fought their way into Agira late on the evening of July 27, but it was not until the

morning of August 2 that they cleared the enemy out of the mountain stronghold of Regalbuto, a village which had the melancholy distinction of receiving the heaviest concentrated air attack of any front-line position in the whole course of the war up to that date. By this time the Eighth Army was close up against the Etna bastion.

The position now was that both British and German divisions were excessively tired. They had been fighting, with little intermission, for three weeks. We had the advantage of numbers, but even so every man in the four and a half divisions had been strained to the full. And the decisive battle was about to be joined. It was now that Montgomery produced the master stroke which broke the Etna position and led to the complete conquest of Sicily in another fortnight.

Of all the divisions which had fought in Tunisia none had won greater distinction than the Seventy-Eighth. It had been the first infantry division to take part in the fighting in Tunisia; it had held a front of ridiculous length through the long winter months; it had stormed Longstop Hill on Good Friday, the most important single action in the entire campaign. Since May this division, which claimed only to have been out of the line for three days in nearly six months of hard fighting, had been resting and training for the next operation. In General Eveleigh the division possessed an energetic and resourceful commander who was capable, as few generals have been capable, of inspiring the men under him with complete confidence. Now, at the height of its form and brimful of confidence, Seventy-Eighth Division was brought into the line to smash the German defences below Etna.

Beneath the south-western slopes of the mountain the Germans had established a string of fortified villages—Adrano, Bianca Villa, Paterno, Centuripe—but the key to all of them was Centuripe itself. Standing on the summit of a steeply-terraced mountain crag, approached only by a single road zigzagging from one hairpin bend to another, and surrounded at the crest by a wall, Centuripe was an obviously tough proposition from the first. The staff officers of Seventy-Eighth Division conned their large-scale maps. The more they looked at



Centuripe the more formidable it appeared. Then Seventy-Eighth Division went into attack, and in three days they had stormed the position and fatally shattered the Etna line.

As a preliminary to the attack on Centuripe it was necessary to force the crossing of the Dittaino river. The place selected for the crossing was the village of Catenanuova, where the river, though wide, is not deep. At that time of year, after the summer's drought, it was certainly not more than knee-deep anywhere along this stretch. It would be comparatively easy for infantry to get across, but there would be the usual problem of transport, since the long arched bridge had been partially, though not thoroughly, demolished by the Germans.

On Thursday, July 29, the attack developed against the Dittaino crossings. Eveleigh's Division concentrating against Catenanuova, while Wimberley's Highland Division attacked at Sferro. The enemy had strong gun concentrations defending the river, mortars and machine-guns well camouflaged close down by the river bank and at least one battery of 88 mm. farther back on the spurs above. It was obviously a case for careful and accurate counter-battery work, and the gunners got down to it. Had the German defences been of a less improvised nature their guns might have escaped detection. As it was they were picked off one by one, and then after nightfall the infantry started to wade the river. They got into the hills dominating Catenanuova and then before dawn they began to clear the village. It was grim work as the infantry moved swiftly and silently with bayonet and grenade, but in less than three-quarters of an hour the whole village had been cleared. It was a model operation, an example of what highly-trained troops can do when they are well led and the practicable plan is basically sound. In the course of a few hours they had forced the river crossing, stormed the spurs beyond and cleared the village house by house. All this had been done in the darkness of a moonless night. Under such conditions all but the best trained troops are liable to become confused and lose their sense of direction. The attacking Brigade never put a foot wrong throughout the entire operation. And, as so often

happens, when a manoeuvre is perfectly carried out, their losses throughout the night were trifling.

It is very seldom that a village, even when it has been heavily bombed, even when it has been fought through by hostile troops, is actually completely deserted by its inhabitants. I cannot think of more than one village in all the shattered ruins of Sicily and southern Italy which has been *totally* abandoned for as much as thirty-six hours by its inhabitants. And it is always the same type of person who remains. The able-bodied of both sexes take to the hills or woods until the most immediate danger has passed over. Those who remain are the very old and a few children, neglected because their parents are probably dead. In Catenanuova I found perhaps a couple of dozen inhabitants, mostly old women far too infirm to move even a mile or two from the village, and a few lonely, frightened children. The old women sat motionless and impassive at the doors of their houses watching the steady line of British infantry file through the streets. Their faces were drawn with lines of hardship and poverty that gave them the sinister quality that one associates with certain of Goya's portraits. There was the same mute acquiescence in the natural and inevitable evil in the order of things. Conquest by an invading army was merely a part of the same process of nature which gave them bad harvests and taxation and erring husbands and flamboyant Fascist notices painted on the walls. It meant just as much and little to them, for they knew that all life was evil.

Here and there British soldiers were squatting on the low doorsteps of the houses placidly munching army biscuits and unripe grapes. You never had to wait long before you saw one of them thrust a packet of biscuits or a tin of bully into the hands of a civilian. The British soldier may not be in every respect an ideal conqueror. He gets drunk too easily and, when he has the opportunity, too frequently. (One of the most depressing sights I have seen in the whole course of the war was the spectacle of three Tommies reeling arm in arm down the centre of the Avenue Jules Ferry in Tunis two days after the victorious entry of our troops. They were men of the Eighth Army. They had driven the Germans two thousand miles from Alamein to Tunis and defeated them whenever they attempted

to stand. And now they were making an exhibition of themselves for the benefit of sniggering Arabs and contemptuous Italians.)

But perhaps I am over-puritanical, and perhaps there is no room for nice, æsthetic fastidiousness in war.

But whatever his short-comings, the British soldier is extraordinarily humane where civilian populations are concerned. He will share his last biscuit and only tin of bully without a second thought. And one has plenty of opportunities of observing the deeply ethical streak in his character. This sounds highfalutin, and perhaps I should have said that while æsthetically he has a hide that a rhinoceros would envy, ethically his comments hit the nail on the head every time. For instance, it's almost impossible to get him to re-act to scenery. Reluctantly he might admit that the lovely hills of Sicily and snow-covered Apennines are "better than the desert," but that is as far as he will go. And he remains equally insensitive, as a general rule, to works of art. Again I am reminded of Rupert Brooke noting gleefully the complaint of one of his soldiers in Flanders in the last war that "what I don't like about this 'ere country, sir, is all these pictures of Jesus Christ and 'is bleeding relations on little bits of glawss." You hear rather similar comments pretty frequently in the army to-day.

But the sight of the poverty and dirt and general squalor of the average Italian village makes an immediate and inefaceable impression. Again and again I have heard soldiers commenting on the contrast between the poverty and meanness of these villages and the boastful announcements painted on the walls. The soldiers put two and two together and comes to his own conclusions about the benefits of Fascism. And his conclusions coincide with yours and mine.

Beyond the village our troops were going forward in extended order, stumping across fields of stubble and brown, parched meadows towards the distant goal of Centuripe. Imagine a Grimm's fairy-tale illustration of any mountain castle perched on a precipitous crag, imagine the fanciful Gothic stronghold of eighteenth-century romance of the Horace Walpole *genre* and you have Centuripe. It stands compact on its hilltop with a clear view in every direction. It looks straight across at Adrano

and Bianca Villa, it looks over the Gerbini plain, and it looks down towards the Dittaino Valley from which the British troops were advancing, looking singularly bare and defenceless as they footed it across the open fields. To add to this, the road by which alone the town could be entered was of the type calculated to bring an unholy joy to those who impose driving tests on embryonic motorists and corresponding alarm and despondency among the candidates themselves.

I found General Eveleigh chatting with some of his staff officers on the hillside. He was as cheerful and eupeptic as I had always known him. I asked him what were the prospects of storming Centuripe.

"Well," he replied, "my boys have been walking up hills ever since they landed in Sicily. They are just going to go on walking up hills until they get Centuripe."

I must have looked rather glum as I cast my eyes off towards the fairy-tale castle ahead of us, for he went on to explain that we possessed one priceless asset in the battle. The Germans were very tired and had not the means of relieving their troops with fresh units. The men defending Centuripe had been in action almost continuously since the invasion of Sicily, whereas it was possible for us to attack by means of a sort of shuttle service, one battalion relieving another in rapid succession. That was bound to tell, and it did tell.

That was on Sunday, August 1. The following night our troops fought their way into Centuripe and soon after dawn on Tuesday morning the town was cleared. It was a great feat of arms.

Late on Sunday night our advanced patrols climbed stealthily up the slopes leading to the town. I used the word "climbed" advisedly, for it was literally a case of climbing in the Heights of Abraham tradition; it was a great deal more than just walking up a hill. But when dawn came on Monday these light forces, faced with heavy cross-fire from the Germans shooting from the roofs and windows of the houses, had to pull out of the town. On the slopes beneath the walls they remained crouched all through Monday trying to avoid the attention of German snipers and firing back when opportunity permitted. About four-thirty in the afternoon a fresh battalion, the Inniskillings,

began moving up the hill, one platoon following another, to attack the town. They went forward in a series of rushes from one terraced ridge to the next, making the most of the cover provided by the vines and olives and the less friendly cactus. On the face of it it seemed sheer Charge-of-the-Light-Brigade tactics, and the enemy was enfilading the approach with heavy machine-gun fire. In fact, as the infantry got closer up under the walls of the town they obtained more and more protection from the steep banking of the terraces, while the cactus provided cover from view if not cover from fire. (Most of the men who spent that night on the hillside were picking cactus thorns out of their hands and faces all through the following day.) While the first wave of attackers lay closer under the town wall, the second wave pushed forward to within a couple of hundred yards of them. They were within hailing distance, but they could not cross the intervening space which was being systematically swept by German machine-gun fire. The situation was rendered even more fantastic by the fact that Italian civilians from time to time popped up on the walls and shouted out usually misleading information to our men immediately below them.

About six o'clock in the evening, following a series of infantry rushes in quite the approved Field Service Regulations manner, the first wave of the Inniskillings penetrated into the town from two points. There were a couple of German tanks in the central square, but rather surprisingly they lumbered off. This was fortunate, as a tank with a clear command of one or more of the main streets of a town is the nastiest sort of obstacle for an infantryman to tackle. The German infantry, however, proved a much more formidable proposition. They fought street by street and house by house. It was mostly an affair of hand grenades and tommy-guns. Roughly speaking, the technique of attacking a town under such conditions demands that the infantryman shall be well supplied with hand grenades. He flings these in at the doors and windows of the houses while other infantrymen wait with tommy guns to shoot up anyone emerging from the buildings.

You don't take many prisoners in street fighting.

Just before nightfall it seemed that the town was clear, but

after dark German snipers began infiltrating back once more. Unexpectedly also some of those who had been concealed in the houses began now to appear on the house-tops and to pick our men off in the streets. In order to deal with them the Inniskillings tried to enter the houses and take them unawares from inside, but they found the doors for the most part bolted and barred, and any attempt to batter a way in merely advertised their presence and deprived them of the chance of surprise. However, a number of our troops succeeded in making their way up on to the roofs of some of the deserted houses, and all through the dark, moonless night a terribly macabre engagement between the snipers continued. It was difficult to know whether a figure dimly discerned on a neighbouring roof was friend or foe. And so the summer night wore on, broken by a solitary shot cleaving the darkness, or perhaps the quick, insistent tattoo of machine-gun fire.

And that is what is meant when an official communiqué announces baldly that a town "was partially occupied by our forces in the course of the night."

But during the hours of darkness the brigade was passing more and more troops into the town. They felt their way cautiously along the narrow winding streets, gradually making contact with those who were already established there. Many of them took off their boots and crept silently along on stockinged feet, going forward in extreme peril to rescue the wounded. By this means a large proportion of these latter, both British and German, were conveyed outside the town to the relative security of the hillside.

It's doubtful who had the more unpleasant or more nerve-racking experience that night—the men precariously perched on the house-tops, wondering whether daylight would reveal a German sniper on an adjoining roof a few yards away, the men feeling their way from house to house and from one treacherous corner to the next, or those who lay just outside the town among the cactus bushes. Some of these latter had contrived, by the use of their bayonets, to hack out some sort of resting place for themselves, but the German machine-gunners on the fringe of the town seemed to have decided that the bulk of the British troops had drawn back out of Centuripe after dark just as they

had done on the previous night. And so at intervals throughout the night they continued to riddle the cactus with concentrated bursts of fire. To add to the general discomfort, anyone who tried to shift into a more favourable position ran the risk of falling from the steeply-banked terraces or being terribly pierced by the cactus thorns.

Before daylight the enemy firing died down, and as the sun rose over the shoulder of Etna our men found that whatever troops had been holding out against them in the town during the night had simply melted away. They hadn't stayed to face another day of fighting. The Inniskillings lost no time in establishing contact between their various isolated outposts and sweeping the town from end to end. But the Germans had gone. They left comparatively few dead, and still fewer prisoners. I do not think it is fair to suggest, as was suggested at the time, that they were unworthy descendants of the Reichswehr of 1940 and 1941. To do so is to depreciate the achievement of Seventy-Eighth Division. The plain fact was that they were very tired men. A point comes when the best troops in the world, if they are called upon to face assault after assault by fresh units relieving one another in quick succession, will be unable to hold out any longer. Yet one felt that they ought to have succeeded in holding Centuripe, but their defence gave some indication of a rather hasty improvisation. For instance, the winding road leading up to the town had scarcely been mined at all, nor had the enemy found time to clear the slopes of the hill of the cactus and olive trees which provided such excellent cover for the attacking force. Had the enemy had anything like the same amount of time to prepare the Centuripe position that they afterwards had to fortify the not essentially more formidable Cassino stronghold, our conquest of Sicily might well have taken two or three weeks longer to achieve. Our losses would have been disproportionately heavier, since there is no swifter way of sending up the rate of casualties than by an operation which involves pushing infantry up over a steep, bare, bullet-swept *glacis*, followed by the bitter fighting which is involved in a house-to-house occupation of a town. We learnt the grim cost of street fighting the following winter in Ortona and Cassino.

Centuripe was a magnificent achievement. Planning, timing, and execution were alike faultless. It was significant that in my entire experience as a War Correspondent I recall no operation in which I heard so many cases of soldiers paying spontaneous tribute to their officers and officers saying how magnificently they had been supported by the men under them. Again and again, to encourage and stimulate their men, officers took deliberate and calculated risks in rushing enemy positions; again and again the men behind them went straight into what appeared a death trap of machine-gun fire. Miraculously, they came through with comparatively light losses. It was a very great achievement in the history of the British Army.

## VII.

## Catania and After

CENTURYPE was the decisive action of the entire Sicilian campaign. It shattered the Etna line, which meant, in effect, the end of German resistance in Sicily. Kesselring, the German commander, was extremely quick to recognise the significance of the loss of this strong-point. It is not quite clear at what point in the invasion the High Command decided that it was no longer profitable to endeavour to retain a bridge-head in Sicily. The first signs of the evacuation of enemy troops were observed as early as July 27, the day the Canadians stormed Agira. In any case, however, the breach of the Etna line was clearly decisive and from that time onwards the Germans were content to fight a rear-guard action back along the roads on either side of Etna converging on Messina.

The most immediate reaction occurred on the coast. Kesselring promptly decided that, with Centuripe gone, Catania was no longer tenable. Centuripe had been cleared by the morning of Tuesday, August 3. Within a few hours the orders had been issued for the evacuation of Catania. That night our patrols worked forward for their customary nightly prod into a small wood near the coast. Hitherto this had been a point about



which the enemy had shown themselves extremely sensitive. At the first indication of the approach of a British night patrol the German outposts had been in the habit of blazing away for all they were worth and whistling up artillery support to second their efforts. In fact, night patrolling was a thoroughly unhealthy occupation in that area and no opportunity had been given to our men to infiltrate into the German positions defending Catania.

But that Tuesday night there was a difference. Our patrols, cautiously moving forward towards the fringe of the wood, saw no indication of the usual alarm signals. They continued to push ahead and found the forward positions which the Hermann Goering Division had been occupying for nearly three weeks, completely deserted. Two powerful concrete pill-boxes covering the exit from the wood had been abandoned. The Germans had gone quietly back to positions just in front of Catania as a preliminary to abandoning the city itself. With daylight Fiftieth Division began to move forward. Advancing in two columns, one along the main road and the other by a subsidiary track which followed the coast, in the course of the day they covered four of the seven miles that divided them from Catania.

I have spoken before of the strange exhilaration that one experiences when the enemy, who have long and tenaciously held some particular sector, suddenly melt away like snow in the course of a single night. To the weary assailants who had battered day after day against the same unyielding defences it must seem that :

“The enemy faints not nor faileth,  
and as things have been, they remain.”

And then, quite abruptly, the enemy disappears. It is difficult to realise that to-day one can stroll at will in the valleys and copses which yesterday concealed scores of watchful, relentless machine-gunners. For nearly three weeks we had gazed day after day, from the ridge above Prima Sole, at the white buildings of Catania seven or eight miles distant shimmering in the summer heat. Three weeks is not a long time to halt in any

one position, but in the swiftly moving Sicilian campaign it seemed a very long time, and Catania had begun to look as tantalisingly unattainable as the slender minaret of Sidi abd el Rahman had looked when one used to wriggle on one's belly up the Aqqaqir ridge during the crucial days of the Alamein battle. One knew with one's intellect that before very long we were bound to take Catania, but one didn't *feel* it in one's bones any longer. The existing line seemed so damnably permanent. Now they were going back, and we knew that in a day or two we should be in Catania.

That afternoon John Redfern and I drove across Prima Sole Bridge. Our car had scarcely reached the farther bank when an enemy shell burst slap upon a British Army lorry about three hundred yards ahead of us in the middle of the road. Every man in the lorry was killed instantaneously, tossed grotesquely hither and thither all over the road and into the ditches on either side. It was not a pleasant sight.

We looked at one another and "felt badly," as the Americans say. It didn't look as if we could get our car past the burning lorry, and if the Germans were going to continue ranging on the road it didn't seem reasonable to expose our car and our driver unnecessarily. We looked at one another again and then got out and, sending the car back, started to tramp forward along the road. We passed the burning lorry (I hadn't realised before that men can still go on burning for quite a time after they are dead), and plodded on through the glaring afternoon heat. The road seemed disturbingly empty, only an occasional ruined truck or unburied corpse marking the grim shadow of war. John and I marched on either side of the road, keeping close to the margin for reasons which I have previously indicated. From time to time we cocked a raised eyebrow across the road at one another, dumbly speculating on the possibility that we might have overshot our forward positions. It's easier to do this in war than you might imagine. When the line is fixed you frequently see a notice on the road where No Man's Land begins, carrying some such announcement as "Nothing But Jerry Beyond This Point," or "If You Go Any Further Take A Cross With You," or, simply and succinctly, "Don't Be A Bloody Fool."

But when the line is in motion no one has time to put up these notice boards.

However, we had no occasion for being disturbed. After walking for three miles we came across a section of Durham Light Infantry of Fiftieth Division lining a ditch at right-angles to the road. By them we were directed to the headquarters of 151 Brigade. We fumbled our way through the closely planted orchards, telling one another, fatuously, to "look out for S-mines, old boy," and passing a batch of lugubrious Italian prisoners, almost the last Italians to be captured in Sicily, we came upon the Brigadier and his staff established in what, twenty-four hours earlier, had been a German Regimental headquarters.

Like everything of its kind which the Germans introduce into war this headquarters gave the impression that it had come to stay. A clearing had been made among the vines and fruit trees to make room for three or four solidly-built army huts. The camp equipment was excellent—beds, cupboards, tables, chairs. (One rather suspected that most of them had been lifted from the houses of Catania.) The walls were decorated with maps and pictures, mostly of German flying aces, since Hermann Goering was a Division closely linked with the Luftwaffe and its original function had been airfield defence. There were any number of books about, mostly of a decidedly more professional or highbrow quality than one would expect to find in a corresponding British officers' mess. Instead of dog-eared detective stories there was Schiller, there was Goethe, there was a history of the Polish campaign, there was a history of the 1914 campaign in France. It was, I repeat, vastly unlike the contents of a British army hut. I don't know what the moral is.

There was also a considerable pile of propaganda literature, all the pamphlets whether by accident or design being directed uniquely against England alone of the Allies.

There were booklets condemning Britain's Rule in India, in Egypt, in Ireland; there was a book dealing with England's "Two Hundred Families"; there was also an excellent and detailed brochure on the various types of British tank. All these were extremely well got up, yet their owners hadn't

troubled to take them away, which was interesting. They had just gone in the night; and now where German officers had lived and worked until the previous afternoon stolid North Countrymen from Tyne and Tees, Durham Coalfields and Yorkshire Moors were sitting placidly among the vines, munching unripe grapes and figs while they waited for the tea to brew up, and speculating in their dispassionate and impersonal manner on the prospects of finding some "vino" in Catania on the morrow. It sounds prosaic enough, but then the British soldier has never been much interested in "*la gloire*," and he reacts to sabre-rattling emotional appeals with his traditional "fer Christ's sake don't talk patriotic!" And if you read Shakespeare's "Henry V" you will find that the English soldiery in the fifteenth century were no less prosaic, for it is the same strain at Agira as at Agincourt, and the men of Catania are heirs in blood and temperament and tradition of the men who fought at Crecy.

We got into Catania easily enough next morning. There was no fighting. Infantry in Bren carriers pushed on past the abandoned pill boxes on the outskirts and nosed their way through the dead suburbs up into the centre of the town. At 8.30 in the morning a note was handed to the Colonel in command of the leading battalion of 151 Brigade, the vanguard of which was at that moment penetrating towards the Piazzzi del Duomo in the very heart of the city. It stated briefly:

"The authorities and functionaries of the city of Catania are in the barracks of the Carabinieri in the Piazza Giovanni Verga awaiting orders." It was signed by the Mayor of Catania, the Marquis di San Giuliano, and constituted the formal surrender of the city.

Catania, as we entered, seemed like a city frozen into immobility. There was not a soul in the streets, there was not a shop of any sort functioning. A mass of debris covered the centre of the Piazza del Duomo, and the trams stood battered and immobilised just where they had stopped when the electric current of the city had been hit. As usual, for us war correspondents there was the urgent imperative need of flashing back a rapid eye-witness picture of what Catania looked like five

minutes after the entry of the first British troops. So we squatted down on the steps of the Cathedral, because there was nowhere else to sit, and started typing away feverishly. I have sometimes wondered what the more primitive inhabitants of these occupied towns think of this strange body of not very war-like looking individuals who descent like locusts with the first troops and, having arrived, promptly sit down, apparently oblivious to all around them, and begin to hammer away at mysterious un-Godly little machines. In Crete, when I was engaged in this manner in the inn of a mountain village, the inn-keeper brought his wife and his entire family to gaze at me. They seemed so fascinated that I could only suppose they had never seen a typewriter before. At Sousse, in Tunisia, there was a high wind blowing when I entered the town. My story had to be written quickly, and the only sheltered place I could find was an abandoned woodshed. As I sat uncomfortably typing on a pile of faggots, small children came and peered curiously at me through the doorway. Then they disappeared, and presently returned carrying bouquets of flowers, which was nice of them. War is full of surprises like that.

I have spoken of Catania as "frozen into immobility," but even in those first minutes one saw it beginning to come to life. When I entered the square there was not a figure to be seen in the streets. Within ten minutes they were choked with a haggard, wild, cheering mob. Buildings that had looked gaunt and deserted began to spew out men and women, young and old. Every citizen of Catania seemed to be in the streets. Actually, of its quarter million inhabitants only fifty thousand remained in the town. The other four-fifths of the population had fled to the hills and the neighbouring villages when we began to bomb the town in earnest. Most of those who remained had slept habitually in air-raid shelters and led a hand-to-mouth existence as best they could. During the last three days before our entry the Germans had made little pretence of maintaining order, and had unashamedly given themselves up to looting. They had carried off furniture, beds, blankets, sheets, pictures, knives, forks, plates, and any food they could lay hands on; and they had been busily engaged in mining the

principal buildings of the city. Some they blew up before they left, in others they deposited time bombs for our benefit. Thus, the Bank of Sicily at the corner of the main square was completely demolished when we arrived; the post office, on the other hand, dissolved in ruins with a ponderous thud while we were actually in the town.

As might have been expected, tension between the Italian civilians and the German troops became very marked during these last days, and some civilians were shot while attempting to prevent the requisitioning of their property. Under the circumstances it was perhaps natural that the British, despite the bombings, should have been received with acclamation. One had not expected it, and it was a little embarrassing. We had bombed these people night after night; we had killed or captured their men folk, and now they came out and applauded us. Old men flung their arms round the necks of British soldiers in the streets, while children clamoured excitedly around them. There was a big German-owned draper's store in the Via Vittorio Emmanuele; within a few minutes the mob had burst open the doors and had begun to indulge in the agreeable pastime of appropriating everything they could lay hands on. When those who were inside had taken all they could conveniently carry, they began flinging packages out of the windows to the people in the street below. Looting is an extraordinarily infectious occupation. The desire to get something for nothing, even if that something is nearly worthless, is as old as human nature. Men and women, agile youths and tiny spindle-legged children scrambled in the streets for the packages that came tumbling down one after another, ripping them open, tearing out their contents, and snatching them greedily from hand to hand. I saw women with as many as a couple of dozen pairs of silk stockings in their arms, their drab working clothes (only the poorest still remained in Catania) startlingly relieved by gaily-coloured scarves round their heads or shoulders. I found myself caught up and carried along bodily in the swirling crowd. A pretty girl, appearing from nowhere, suddenly flung a silk scarf round my neck. Unfortunately she disappeared just as rapidly. One would like to receive every present that way, and I have the scarf to this day.

But the hectic excitement engendered by the plunder was a ghoulisish substitute for genuine gaiety. Underneath the feverish surface one knew that the people were hungry and tired, frightened and nerve-ridden; and so the total effect of this Autolykan Saturnalia was profoundly depressing. When the hubbub had to some extent died down I wandered off through the city with Alexander Clifford my *confrère* of the *Daily Mail*. We had entered a good many conquered towns together in the past year or two, including Tripoli and Tunis. Neither of us felt any doubt that this was the gloomiest, the most profoundly depressing entry we had known. It was so different from Tripoli, where the life of the town had carried straight on without interruption; we had entered the town at seven in the morning, and just after noon we had sat down to lunch at the principal hotel, where sleek, white-coated waiters sped deftly from table to table uttering the time-honoured war-cry of their calling, "Coming, sair! Coming, sair!" It was practically true to say that the last Italian officers were just finishing their last drinks in the bar preparatory to evacuating the town as the first British officers entered for their pre-lunch *apéritifs*.

That had been Tripoli, and in unbombed Tunis the enthusiasm of the population had been utterly genuine and spontaneous, of a quite different quality from the tense gaiety of Catania. In Tunis any British soldier could have kissed any girl in the town, and most of them did. But we didn't feel happy about Catania. We walked round looking for a single shop that might be open, and found none. We went to the offices of the principal newspaper, and they were bolted, shuttered and deserted. We wandered down to the docks. They were less badly damaged than those of Benghazi or Bizerta, but there wasn't a single longshoreman to be seen. In the simple phraseology of the British soldier the place "fair gave us the pip," and we had no desire to stay longer than was necessary.

Before we left the town, however, we called on the Marquis di San Giuliano. We found a small, pleasant English-speaking gentleman, dressed in immaculate Bond Street suiting, who received us courteously. He explained to us that he was nephew of that Marquis di San Giuliano who had been Italian Foreign

Secretary in August, 1914, and had been largely responsible for Italy entering the first world war on the side of Britain and France. Or so he said; he didn't know that I knew that the Marquis di San Giuliano had died several months before Italy joined the war and that the man really responsible had been Baron Sonnino. But I didn't tell him that I knew it, because he seemed so nice. That is always the trouble in Italy; everyone you meet—or nearly everyone—is so charming and so demonstratively pro-British that you begin to wonder what has happened to all the Fascists. They can't *all* have got away with the Germans. I found myself wondering how the Marquis had held his job down if he had really been as anti-Fascist as he claimed. But perhaps I do him an injustice; perhaps, because he was one of the biggest land owners in Sicily, Mussolini had judged it desirable to appoint him without exacting more than lip service to the Fascist creed.

San Giuliano was not at all pleased with the Germans. A number of Prussian officers had entered his house at four o'clock one morning and insisted on billeting themselves there. Moreover, as there were not enough beds for all of them they had hustled his two aged aunts out of their bedrooms to make room for themselves. Once his car had been stopped in the street, he had been covered by a machine-gun, while the contents of the car were looted by German soldiers. He had never received any recompense or apology for this action on the part of his nominal allies. That very morning as he drove into town his car had been held up again and requisitioned by a German officer, who explained that he needed it for carrying ammunition to a battery nearby. The Mayor had to proceed on foot.

"Fortunately," he said, with a twinkle in his eye, "it was only a few minutes later that I met the English colonel commanding your advanced troops. I think I was able to give him some useful information with regard to the location of that battery."

I asked the Mayor how far he had been able to get any reliable news of the progress of the war.

"Oh! but that is easy," he said. "We follow the exploits of your General Montgomery eagerly on the radio. We usually



take the five-thirty and the eleven o'clock bulletins of the B.B.C." That homely remark was the best indication one could have desired of the manner in which the Italian people had come to rely on the British Ministry of Information as a matter of course for their news, just as they were already coming to rely on British troops for their liberation from Germany.

After the fall of Catania on August 5, the interest of the campaign declined progressively. The Germans had by this time already evacuated nearly a third of their forces in the island, for they were taking no risks of another Tunisian debacle, and henceforth operations were largely confined to a gradual withdrawal by the Germans punctuated by occasional rearguard actions. On the whole the enemy retained the initiative to a sufficient extent to enable him generally to dictate the speed of his retreat, and he lost very few prisoners indeed during this final phase.

The lines of the German retreat were split by the Etna massive. One force withdrew northwards from Catania along the coastal roads through the close country that lies between Etna and the sea. The other, after the loss of Adrano, Paterno and the villages at the foot of Etna, all of which were cleared of the enemy by the morning of August 7, withdrew inland round the western side of Etna in the direction of Bronte and Randazzo. A further German force, composed largely of the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division, was withdrawing rapidly back along the northern coast of Italy towards Messina.

The German tactics in retreat were simple and effective. They were an elaboration of those employed by Rommel during the previous winter in his retreat in Tripoli. Road demolitions contributed to slow down our pursuit and keep us at arm's length of the main body of the retreat, since there was no practical means of following up the enemy in this broken and mountainous country save along the main roads. Covering these demolitions, a small rearguard remained adequately supplied with mortars and machine-guns sufficient to hold off our infantry and prevent the repair of the demolitions until our artillery arrived on the scene. By the time that we were ready for a heavy and concentrated shoot at the German positions the enemy had, as a

rule, quietly pulled back to the next demolition, perhaps five or six miles farther along the road.

Our own tactics conformed to a fairly regular pattern. We manœuvred less, but hit harder with air and artillery bombardment than in the early days of the invasion. Fiftieth Division followed the enemy up the coast from Catania while the Highlanders and Seventy-Eighth Division took the inland route towards Randazzo. The heavier fighting occurred on this inland line of pursuit. Our infantry consistently worked their way forward until they made contact with enemy rearguards. Then, if the opposition was stiff the air came over and did its best to obliterate the enemy positions as it had done at Agira and Regalbuto. After the air the artillery got to work. When they had completed their shoot the infantry went forward once more to test the strength of the German defence. If this probe revealed that there was still some kick left in the defenders, we usually refrained from pressing home the attack and sacrificing valuable lives in the process. Instead, the artillery took up the running again and shelled the German positions until they were effectively silenced. This was not difficult, as there was little counter-battery work on the enemy's part, and the Luftwaffe had virtually ceased to play any part at all in the campaign. (They did come over and raid Army headquarters at Lentini and provided us with three hours of fireworks the night after Air-Marshal "Maori" Conyngham had told us at a Press Conference that the German Air Force had been shot out of the sky. But that was just an impertinent postscript, and what Conyngham told us was true enough, for the R.A.F. had done its job with complete and devastating thoroughness.)

By these tactics we gradually eased the enemy back through the close country north of Catania at a fairly uniform rate of three to four miles a day without once being involved in any very serious action. Inland the Germans resisted more toughly in front of Bronte (which fell on August 9) and Randazzo (which fell on August 13). I could not help feeling that our pursuit tactics resembled the employment of a ponderous sledge-hammer to crush a small but alert reptile which slips away time after time just as the hammer ascends. The Germans lost few men in the process; nor did it prove so exhausting an experience

as the hard fighting of the middle phase of Sicily, since on these narrow fronts it was possible for them to rest battalions by leap-frogging them backwards. For example, Battalion A would prepare a defence position while Battalion B covered them some few miles farther back. Then Battalion B would be withdrawn, passing through Battalion A, and the latter would take on the responsibility of fighting the next rearguard action.

I always felt that the Germans should have put up a rather stiffer resistance in the country immediately north of Catania. The terrain here was utterly different from the broad, hedge-intersected wheatfields of the Gerbini plain or the rather wuthering heights around Bronte. For this stretch of coast might be called the Sicilian Riviera, so different is it either from the agricultural country south of Catania or the barren mountains towards the centre of the island. I have described it as "close" country, in the tactical sense. That is to say that there is ample cover from orchards and trees and houses, the ground is gently undulating and there are no long views. In other words, it was perfect country for the concealment of infantry, tanks or guns. One flank rested on the sea, the other on the slopes of Etna. Any attacking force was necessarily road-bound, since even if the infantry were to abandon their vehicles and to resign themselves to advancing on foot, progress through the broken, masked ground of orchard and garden or over rough slopes of lava was bound to be a desperately painful affair, where in Falstaff's words "Eighty yards of uneven ground is three score and ten miles"—or it seems like it!

I should describe that sort of country as a tactician's paradise. I have heard that phrase applied to the desert, which is wrong. The bareness, flatness and essential emptiness of the desert render the movements of units a perfectly simple affair, conditioned only by problems of supply. But the very absence of physical features deprives it of much of its value as a tactical training-ground. Physical features provide both obstacle and opportunity. North of Catania they existed in profusion, and that is why such country should more appropriately be named a tactician's paradise. Let us take a simple parallel. This terrain surpasses the desert in the demands which it makes on tactical skill just as chess, with its varied combinations of move-

ment, exceeds in tactical subtlety the elementary simplicity of draughts. If the Germans had chosen, they could have defended that country village by village, undulation by undulation, for every feature in the landscape utters the word "cover" and the flanks are almost hermetically sealed by mountain and sea. But they had received their marching orders, and they went.

Anyhow, whether tactical or not, this stretch of coast is most attractive to the eye, provided that you like your countryside a trifle urban and sophisticated. After all, one is not always in love with the pastoral. It is pleasant to drive along a winding *corniche* with the blue Mediterranean on one's right hand and a succession of beautifully named villages—Aci Castello, Santa Maria di Malati, San Leonardello—merging into one another in a by no means unattractive form of ribbon development. It is pleasant to see clean whitewashed villas bowered among jasmine and bougainvillea. The Germans might have destroyed these villages as they passed through in the course of their retreat, but for some reason or other they didn't. It is pleasant to see children who do not look hungry, and for some reason or other the children in these villages did not look hungry. It is pleasant to be in a land of legends, and just north of Catania you may see a rocky little cove which is known as the Port of Ulysses. Here, according to local tradition, the Greek leader, blown by unfavourable winds out of the direct route to his island home of Ithaca, landed on the island of Polyphemus. The substantiation, or the basis, of the tradition lies in the existence of three large crags close together a mile or so offshore. They are known as the isles of the Cyclops, and they are reputed to be the rocks which the blinded giant hurled into the sea at Ulysses and his companions as they sailed away. Here, too, (unless my memory stumbles), Æneas paused on his way from the fall of Troy to celebrate those funeral games, described in the Fifth Book of Virgil's "Æneid," and that boat-race which was so infinitely more exciting than any boat-race of recent years—at any rate to a supporter of Oxford.

With the town of Acireale I fell promptly and whole-heartedly in love. It is a glory of Baroque architecture, and none of the guide-books seem to do it justice. I don't know whether

Mr. Sacheverell Sitwell in his "Southern Baroque Art" refers to it. No doubt he does, but his book unfortunately has never come my way, for which I blame myself and wander around with half a guinea in my pocket trying to find it. If he does not know it, and I can hardly suppose that he does not, then I can promise him an unforgettable experience as soon as "the curse of Hitler has been lifted" and officials have ceased being tiresome about passport visas.

The central square of Acireale is the loveliest piece of architecture I have seen in Sicily. The magnificent, unbroken seventeenth-century façade of the town hall, with its balconies supported by gargoyles and enclosed by beautiful wrought-iron railings, reminds one irresistibly of a backcloth painted by Inigo Jones for a masque by Ben Jonson. The façade is so deliciously ornate, so perfectly symmetrical; the receding diagonal streets are in such careful perspective. One is pleasantly reminded of Oscar Wilde's reflections on Nature's habit of imitating Art, or rather, I should say, of the architect deriving his inspiration from the scene-painter.

Having said all this, I need hardly add that Acireale was a friendly place. The inhabitants seemed to like us; the small boys clambered all over the Sherman tanks parked in the square and extended grubby hands for "biscotti." I was told that there had been a battle in these streets between the British and the Germans; fortunately, it appeared to have left little mark on the town itself. The Germans, I learned, had fought well, but the British had been "more subtle"—whatever that meant!

Anyhow, it was all very satisfactory.

## VIII. Three Came Unarmed

ON the afternoon of Saturday, August 14, three figures climbed wearily up the precipitous goat-track which leads from the sea-shore to the hilltop town of Taormina, the most justly celebrated beauty spot in Sicily. They were technically civilians, being war correspondents, and the townspeople, leaning over the ramparts, watched their ascent with interest. Panting and exhausted, they reached the summit and found themselves surrounded by a couple of dozen excited townsfolk. Presently the Italian Commandant arrived and made formal surrender of the town, for no British troops had yet arrived.

It was an entertaining day, and it shows what can happen, and what fun you can have if you hold a roving commission, when the enemy forces ahead really begin to disintegrate or to withdraw without further attempts at serious fighting.

I had set out that morning with Alan Moorehead of the *Daily Express* and Alexander Clifford of the *Daily Mail*, the Orestes and Pylades of the desert war. We had met originally in Athens in the spring of 1940. We had journeyed around together on a dozen battlefields in North Africa and Tunisia. We had driven into Tunis in the same car among the leading tanks, and been ambushed in the street for our pains. Now, by mutual consent, we had linked up once more in Sicily. It was the beginning of a triumvirate which lasted for many months. It's a tricky business travelling week after week with the same companions, working frequently at high pressure, shifting one's quarters almost from day to day; but throughout the entire period I never recall a quarrel or even a serious difference of opinion. Like Richard Macmillan and the late A. B. Austin, Moorehead and Clifford are correspondents whom I am proud to claim among my friends. I don't quite know what was our intention when we started out in the morning. By that stage of the campaign it had become practically impossible for front-line correspondents to report the war any longer, for what are politely known as "technical reasons." For reasons which I cannot discuss, though I should like to do so, the war was in

effect being reported almost exclusively at second-hand by correspondents sitting at Allied Headquarters in Algiers—in a different continent. Every morning at eleven o'clock and every afternoon at five they attended a Press Conference at which the latest news from the Sicilian and Italian campaign was handed out to them by a military spokesman. This had gone on all through the Tunisian campaign of the preceding spring. It had the one advantage that it enabled the news to get out quickly—usually about twenty-four hours before the despatches from the front line correspondents could arrive. Obviously it is a good thing that news should be passed through to the outside world during wartime as speedily as is compatible with military security, but again and again this greater speed was purchased at the price of accuracy. Frequently the reports from base were garbled by writers who inevitably had never seen the battle which they were attempting to describe, who perhaps had never seen any battle at all. It was not the fault of these correspondents at base. They were sent there by their organizations just as we others were sent to the forward positions. It was the outcome of the system which sacrificed everything to the fetish of speed.

The result was that when the real front line despatch arrived usually forty-eight hours after the events which it described, it was too often already stale to the jaded palates of home readers fed to satiety from Algiers on "giant armies locked in mortal combat" or "mauled Panzers reeling backwards" and kindred lively but misleading figures of speech.

It was a pity.

As I have said, we had very little idea when we set out in the morning that we were on to anything good. We had a pleasant, leisurely bathe among the rocks and grottoes of Aci Castello. We drove on for a few miles and stopped to call upon the Baron.

"The Baron" really was a Baron, though I can't remember his other name. We had met him first two or three days earlier. Driving along the road towards the battle, I had noticed a small, eager figure, looking rather like David Low the cartoonist, prancing about on the balcony of a roadside house. He had invited us up to get a view of the battle from his balcony. In return we were able, a few minutes later, to point out to him General Montgomery on the road below. The little Baron

nearly bounced off the balcony with excitement. It was a case of "And did these eyes see Shelley plain?" From that moment he was our devoted friend; he begged us to call in again whenever we were passing that way. Not knowing how he was situated for food, and not liking to put a strain upon his hospitality, we had brought our own food along and proposed to introduce it, as delicately as possible, to the Baronial table.

But here lay the difficulty. We began tentatively to inquire whether our host had plenty of food, intending to supply his deficiencies ourselves. Misunderstanding our intention, the Baron promptly produced three loaves of bread and planted one of them in front of each of us. We tried again; we inquired after the meat situation. The Baron spoke a few words in rapid Italian to the Baroness, who vanished from the room, and after sundry noises (off) from the kitchen regions three plates of beef were set before us. After that we gave it up. But the Baron did not. He went on producing dish after dish in the manner of a conjuror who evokes goldfish and rabbits out of a top hat. We had to consume an immense meal, which looked like being the end of our activities for the day. However, we did eventually extricate ourselves from our genial host after he had extracted the promise that we would bring some of our friends next time as well. Then we drove on, with no very definite goal except that of catching up with the advance guard wherever it might be.

All went well until we reached the village of Fiumefreddo (inevitably re-christened by our troops "Fuming Freddie"). It was here that our difficulties began. As usual it was a case of demolitions. The enemy had blown three bridges along the road, all quite close to one another, and had made a very thorough job of it. At that stage of the war it was demolitions, demolitions all the way; to the modern motorised army they were exactly what trenches had been to the infantry armies of the last war. There was a rutty boulder-strewn deviation which we could take along a dried-up river bed, but only one or two jeeps had succeeded, hitherto, in getting along it, and our car clearly wouldn't take it. There was nothing to do but to get out and walk, as we wanted to contact the forward patrols of



Fiftieth Division, which were now presumably working their way along the coastal road in the direction of Taormina. Besides, we wanted to walk our lunch off, too.

So off we went along the river bed, which was slow going, until we re-joined the main road beyond the bridges. It was simple enough after that, foot-slogging along the tarmac. It's true that the road was mined with Teller mines, big round creatures about the size of a soup plate, which we had so often encountered in the desert. But it's easy to make too much fuss about mines, particularly if you happen to be walking. We found it quite easy to detect them in the tarmac. Since the enemy had been using the road himself up to the last moment, the mines had necessarily been inserted somewhat hastily, and the tar had not had time to settle over them. For the most part they were open and unconcealed, and he who ran—or, at any rate, walked with care—might read them.

We reached the Alcantara. It was only five or six miles short of Taormina, and it was one of the places where the Germans had been expected to put up at least a temporary resistance. But they hadn't; they had merely vanished. The Alcantara, however, unlike its sister streams, had not dried up in the summer heat. It was a swiftly flowing river, and as the bridge had been (of course) demolished there was no way of crossing it except by wading. We took off our shoes, socks and trousers and plunged in. The water came well above our knees, and very cooling it was.

Beyond the river we found our most advanced patrol. The men were stretched out on the ground by the roadside snatching half an hour's rest while they waited for the order to advance. From them we learned that the enemy had broken off contact and had gone back some distance along the road. No one knew quite how far, so we decided to go on and see for ourselves. We felt pretty certain that we should run into someone or other of our own forces ahead of this patrol. About this time Alan decided that the joys of walking along a tarred road on a hot summer afternoon were over-rated, but we out-voted him and continued to hike forward.

We were now alone on the road, but from lanes and by-ways

peasants began to emerge, shyly offering us wine and baskets of fruit. It helped to lend a pleasantly Dionysian atmosphere to the enterprise, and we had to resist the temptation to stop and chat with them. But in front of us and above us, with the heat haze shimmering between like a curtain of gauze arose Taormina, that honeymoon resort of the Nineteen Twenties, looking now like a vision of the Celestial City in a child's illustrated edition of "Pilgrim's Progress."

But before you get to Taormina there is a formidable slope to scale, and before you begin to climb this slope you have to walk the entire length of Giardini. And Giardini is surely the longest village, that is only a village, in Europe. I know what I am talking about in this connection, because at one time of my life, when I was wont to dine not wisely but too well in town, I had been in the habit of missing the last train back to the wilds of northern Hertfordshire. That used to mean a walk at midnight from Hatfield, in the course of which I used to pass through Stevenage. And Stevenage goes on for ever and ever. But Giardini on a hot August afternoon seems even longer.

In the bay a British gunboat lay at anchor, and a number of Italian soldiers standing on the beach were trying to surrender to it—or to anyone else who would be good enough to spare time to capture them. But by this time in the campaign we had all become pretty blasé about Italian prisoners, and no one really wanted them. It was not until later that we began to discover their potentialities as mess orderlies.

Giardini's immense length upon length of empty street stretched out immeasurably before us. It was wrapt in a more than sabbatical silence for, although it had escaped bombing except at one point, it was entirely deserted. Throughout its whole length we only saw a single inhabitant, and she was a crazed old woman who yammered at us unmeaningly from her toothless gums. I began to feel as if we were stepping into some evil fantasy of Edgar Allan Poe.

A *bizarre* indication of the recent passage of troops was provided by the extraordinary number of dead cats lying car-flattened in the middle of the road. One wouldn't expect dead cats to provide much of a clue to the movements of enemy

forces, but we became very Sherlock Holmes about them. We pointed out to one another that the Germans must have been driving their vehicles back through the night, and that the cats had been blinded by the glare of their headlights. That meant that the enemy were sacrificing secrecy to speed in their departure. And so on, and so on.

The only other indications that this had once been a place where men and women had lived was provided by Mussolini's platitudes and wisecracks painted in large black letters on the walls. And they were even more dead than the cats.

The motor road to Taormina winds circuitously uphill towards the town, but there is a goat track, that leads more directly upwards. We began to climb this, plodding painfully forward and noticing little save the rapidly gathering groups of townspeople on the terrace at the summit. Eventually we staggered to the crest and found ourselves, feeling slightly ridiculous, in the midst of an enthusiastic crowd. An Italian officer, who appeared to have taken charge of the troops in the town greeted us with words so emphatically Biblical that they helped to maintain the Pilgrim's Progress fantasy which I was busily engaged in elaborating in my mind. "My lords," he said, "we have waited too long for you!"

I wish one were always welcomed so graciously.

And so we had come to Taormina. Not quite by the same means by which Noel Coward's heroes and heroines used to arrive there in Act Two in the course of their matrimonial general post. But we had arrived. We were rather crestfallen to learn that we were not quite the first to enter the town. A mysterious, peripatetic British major (later, we discovered he was someone whom all three of us knew well, Major Geoffrey Keating) had passed through earlier in the afternoon. He had commandeered a car and driven on ahead. He was now presumably well on the way to Messina, miles and miles ahead of the British Army. That was Geoffrey Keating all over; he was the Brigadier Gerard of the Mediterranean war. He bore a charmed life, for he was usually free-lancing about well in advance of the army. We had picked up traces of him at various points along our route, until the figure of this unknown major in whose footprints we were following began to assume for us

the combined attributes of Man Friday and Good King Wenceslaus.

The Italian officer told us that the last Germans had left Taormina the previous morning after a street battle with Italian troops in which the latter had driven them out with heavy losses.

We politely pretended to believe him.

We were taken along to a café, and welcomed with lukewarm beer. We could have had champagne, but unwisely we refused it. I wish we hadn't.

There seemed to be a general desire that we should accept the formal surrender of the town from the Prefect, and I think that there was a lurking hope on the parts of our hosts (or were they our prisoners?) that the evening would close with speech-making and song, for the Italians like their wars to be as operatic as possible. But we were feeling tired, we had to get back to camp to write our despatches, and so we politely cut short all this tomfoolery.

You couldn't believe that Taormina was really a part of the war, even though a bomb had gone slap through the roof of the largest hotel, which incidentally had been the German General Headquarters. The inhabitants, like all the other Sicilians, made no pretence of being interested in the fighting. They were thinking only of ways and means of picking up the broken threads of their peace-time lives and occupations, and of forgetting that they had ever been participants in a war.

This struck us forcibly when we climbed up to the Greek theatre on the hillside above Taormina. The customary guide received us in the customary ingratiating manner, exactly as though we were peace-time tourists. It was a fine theatre, somewhat botched by later Roman restorations and additions.

"Sicily," remarked the guide parenthetically, "has suffered much from Rome." He toddled round with us, pointing out the views, drawing our attention to the fact that the mainland of Italy was clearly visible some twenty miles distant. Then he led us to a modern house adjoining the theatre and pointed to a sheet of note-paper pinned to the door.

"This was left by the Italian officer who lived here," he said.

The note was written in English. It ran as follows :

*"To the British or American officer who takes Taormina.*

*"The wife of the writer is an American citizen by birth, and numerous witnesses can be brought to prove this. She is at present living in Taormina with friends, so please see that she is not molested.*

*"I rely on the British or American officer who takes the town to respect my villa which has been damaged by bombs and the doors broken.*

*"The arm-chair belongs to Miss Dora Bell, an Englishwoman.*

*"Please, every morning at eight give some food to the pigeons in the Greek theatre. They will be on or near the terrace. Thanks.*

*"I am a Captain in the Navy, called up on service during the war.*

*"Carlo Zuccaro."*

The appropriate comment for that note doesn't exist. You can't take a nation seriously whose soldiers go to war and leave notes for their enemies asking them to feed the pigeons.

It was a pity that we couldn't have stayed the night in Taormina, as the atmosphere was obviously hotting up towards a jolly evening and there was a prospect of a good time being had by all. I felt awfully tempted to stay and damn the consequences, but our typewriters were back at the camp fifty miles away, and we *had* to write our despatches that night or very early on the following morning. We didn't relish the prospect of the eight-mile walk back to our car, and so we tried to borrow bicycles, but there wasn't a bicycle to be had. Reluctantly we realised that we should have to walk.

By this time we had become nothing but an excuse for a public jollification. More and more inhabitants clustered around us; they linked arms with us and all together we marched laughing and cheering through the streets. Someone produced a mandolin and began strumming. That added the final lunatic

touch of musical comedy to the scene. Against the magnificent scenic backcloth which Taormina provides we went swinging through the streets, each of us with a girl hanging on to each arm, and a musician waddling along behind providing appropriate incidental tunes. I never left a place more reluctantly, for I felt that it was going to be a good evening.

We started off downhill and, looking up at each bend of the path, we saw the inhabitants on the ramparts gradually diminishing in size but continuing to wave to us. About half-way down we came upon a well-concealed concrete machine-gun post hidden by foliage. We had not been looking very carefully where we were going, and we almost literally ran into it. A couple of Italian soldiers emerged and surrendered to us. We instructed them to break their rifles and throw the essential part of their machine-gun over the cliff. They obeyed perfectly meekly with smiles and compliments.

Climbing up the hill we had passed within a few feet of this same machine-gun post. We had been far too intent on our climb to notice it. The two Italian soldiers had had us completely at their mercy. If they had chosen to fire we should have all three been dead within a few seconds. They didn't choose, for by this time the German was their enemy, and they "*contentissimi*" to be made prisoners by the British.

Walking back along the road in the dusk we discussed the tactical implications of the day's episode. It ought not, we felt, to have been possible for us to get so far ahead of our own advanced patrols. Admittedly, Taormina was off the main road, and was not in itself a military objective of any particular significance. At the same time we *had* got ahead of our patrols; it had proved perfectly easy to do so. Not for the first time our advanced forces had lost contact with the retreating enemy. We had seen it happen so often before in Africa. Since Alamein the Germans had evolved a technique of withdrawal, to meet the changed military situation, as skilful in many respects as was their offensive tactic so brilliantly practised in the campaigns of 1940. We lost contact because our army was road-bound, and a single demolition was sufficient to delay our pursuit for many hours while the enemy got clear away. Yet the three of us had been able quite easily to circumvent these demolitions

on foot and get ahead of the army. Therefore reconnaissance forces on foot could have done the same thing.

But a swifter method of pursuit was needed. It was Moorehead who had the idea first. "Bicycles," he said; "bicycles, that's what we ought to have!" It was bicycles that we had sought for to make our return journey. Motor-cyclists or bicyclists carrying Bren guns or light machine-guns (it should not prove impossible to carry these on bicycles) would be able to circumvent any normal demolition. They might provide just that necessary link in the pursuit without which all the hard work of ejecting the enemy from his positions was liable to be in great part wasted.

Some weeks later I raised the point in conversation with General Alexander. He countered laughingly with the *argumentum ad hominem*. Would I be prepared to try it myself? I wouldn't. "Nor would I," said the General. But I couldn't feel that our own personal reactions were relevant. I did not, at that time, know that the German reconnaissance troops themselves used bicycles, but I did feel convinced that in solving this particular problem the answer to the mechanised defensive is not necessarily a more intricate mechanisation of the offensive, but rather a return to the more flexible use of infantry, those final arbiters of battle.

I felt that at the time, and I still feel it now.

## IX. Sicily: The Summing-Up

**T**AORMINA was virtually the last episode of the Sicilian campaign. The Germans were now progressively evacuating their forces across the three miles' stretch between Messina and Reggio, and there was not much that we could do to stop them. They were employing a good number of Siebel ferries, large double pontoons of exceptionally shallow draft. They were heavily armed with anti-aircraft guns, and each of them was capable of carrying about five hundred men. The anti-

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aircraft defensives concentrated around Reggio and Messina at that time were probably the most powerful in the world. Even if we had possessed dive bombers it is doubtful if we could have used them effectively over the Straits. Nor would it have been wise to have risked our naval units in the narrow seas. The possible gains from sinking enemy troop-ships would not have justified the very great risk to our own warships. The Germans were concentrating upon avoiding a repetition of the Cape Bon disaster and, with conditions to a much greater extent in their favour, they succeeded, for their losses during these last days were negligible, and they went more or less in their own time.

German Army Orders which fell into our hands about this time laid a good deal of stress upon the necessity of getting away the maximum amount of military equipment to the mainland. "The passport to Italy is a gun" was one of the phrases employed in these documents. What was still more significant was the attitude which Germans were instructed to adopt towards their Italian allies. No Italian troops had any claim to be evacuated, it was stated, except those who were fighting as coherent units under German command. All others were to be thrust off the roads if their transport encumbered the passage of German troops. It was a ruthless, but perfectly sensible, decision. It always is sensible after a defeat to endeavour to withdraw your best troops intact at the expense of the demoralised elements. Rommel had done exactly the same thing after Alamein. He had collared the transport of the Italian Divisions and left them to shift for themselves, and although our propaganda made great play with his "treachery to his allies," he was perfectly right to do so.

One rather half-hearted effort was made by our troops during the last days of the campaign to rake in the German rearguard. The American advance along the north coast during August had been facilitated by a succession of seaborne landings which had ejected the Germans from one position after another. Now, much too late, the British command attempted a similar operation.

On the night of August 15, taking advantage of an eclipse of the moon, forces about a brigade in strength made two



surprise landings on the coast about midway between Taormina and Messina. As an attempt to round up the German rearguard, or even to speed the parting guests, this operation cannot be regarded as having been very successful. So far from cutting off the German rearguard, our landing forces found themselves rather ingloriously hemmed in by road demolitions on either flank, while they were under fire from German batteries on the mainland. True, they did capture some German prisoners, just enough to make up a cricket team—without a twelfth man.

Meanwhile the Americans, racing along the north coast practically without opposition entered Messina about eight o'clock on the evening of August 16. A single German battery situated somewhere near the extreme north-eastern tip of the island continued to fire at intervals through the night, but early on the morning of August 17 it was silenced by American guns, though the crew apparently made good their escape across the Straits.

Sicily had been conquered in thirty-eight days. It was no inconsiderable achievement. The island was ten thousand square miles in area and it had a coastline of six hundred miles. After the fall of Tunis in mid-May, and more particularly after the attack on Pantellaria a month later, it must have been quite obvious to the Axis High Command that Sicily was the next objective. The pattern of our air bombing, with its heavy concentrations against German aircraft on the Gerbini plain underlined the direction towards which our strategy was aiming. Under these circumstances it would not have been surprising if the enemy resistance had continued far longer. I believe that Alexander and Montgomery, though they had hoped if everything went according to plan (which almost never happens in war) that they might clean up Sicily in three or four weeks, had been prepared for a campaign for anything up to three months' duration.

The east-west passage of the Mediterranean was now clear; that was the first great strategic gain. Italy was tottering towards her fall, Mussolini had gone and the Badoglio Government had already begun to open negotiations for a surrender; that was the second clear gain. We had had valuable experience

in combined operations against a hostile coast; that was the third.

The balance of losses was comfortably in our favour. We had taken about 150,000 prisoners, though these included very few Germans (6,000 was the official figure given). The Italian Army in Sicily had ceased to exist. Those who had not surrendered had merely melted away into the countryside or sought for ways and means of demobilising themselves and getting home. After the first three or four days I never had the slightest doubt that the entire Italian Army was finished as a fighting force and that we should have no more trouble either in Sicily or in Italy. German losses were estimated at about 29,000 or 30,000; and our own and those of the Americans amounted to 25,000, a fair proportion of these casualties being malarial cases, but our battle losses had been fairly heavy in the fighting around Prima Sole. The enemy lost, it was estimated, 260 tanks and 502 guns as against the Allies' loss of 103 tanks and 251 guns. But it was in aircraft that the balance was most heavily in our favour. During the course of the campaign and the preliminary operations which led up to it we destroyed 1,691 enemy aircraft, while our losses amounted to no more than 274.

It had been a beautifully executed campaign, and strategically it was possible to point to only two flaws. The first was the failure to rush the Gerbini plain and Catania at the end of the opening week after the brilliant success of our landings had placed us in a peculiarly favourable position for doing so. That we should have suffered higher immediate losses is probable, but I believe that the long-term results would have been decisively favourable to us. The second aspect of the campaign in which performance fell short of promise occurred during the final phase. I think it is not too much to say that after the battle of Centuripe and the German decision to evacuate Sicily the enemy command did, to a great extent, regain the initiative. They retreated very much at their own speed and with insignificant losses. We failed to bring them to battle or to round up any important number of prisoners.

There were two reasons for this, to both of which I have made reference earlier. We were unable to maintain contact

with the enemy because we had no answer to their demolition tactics. We had no reason to be, and we were not, taken by surprise by these tactics, since we had experienced them all the way back through the desert during the previous winter. There may have seemed to be no *apparent* answer to them, but in warfare there is always an offensive answer to every defensive conundrum, and *vice versa*. It is a case of thinking of it and then obtaining the necessary technical means. I do not pretend to claim that my own suggestion of bicycles provides more than a partial and experimental step towards the solution, but it does represent some attempt to grapple with the problem.

More serious, I think, was our failure to make use of sea-borne landings behind the enemy positions. When the enemy first held us in front of Catania round about July 18 we heard rumours that a landing was to be made behind Catania to cut off their forces, but nothing came of it. I know that sea-borne landings cannot be improvised in the twinkling of an eye. I know that there are not many beaches along the coast north of Catania that would have been appropriate for a landing. But one has to bear in mind that the Germans at that stage were by no means in a position to oppose such an operation in strength. They had rushed troops into the Catania plain to hold the front line. They had not time to make any corresponding arrangements to protect their coastal flank. In other words, improvised attack would have been met with only improvised defence. Unfortunately, contrary to the general belief, the Germans are better military improvisers than ourselves. I know that it has not been the fashion to say this, but it is my profound conviction after having read all I have been able to lay my hands on about the first World War and having been an eye-witness of no inconsiderable part of the second. The German improvises better because he thinks more habitually and more continuously in terms of warfare and because intelligent military experimenters are encouraged rather than suppressed, as they, too frequently, are in the British Army. In consequence the Germans are nearly always mentally about two jumps ahead of us in military theory and practice. They had thought out an offensive tactic for the present war which brought them brilliant and very nearly decisive success in the opening phases while we, and to

a still greater extent the French, clung to the old trench system ideas of the last war. In so far as there was any serious tactical thinking, it seems to have been in a retrograde direction, for we did not follow up our own invention of the tank to its logical military conclusion. Between the wars it would appear that our military mind was thinking not so much in terms of 1918 as of 1916. Again, when the tide of war began to turn against them and compelled them to adopt a largely defensive rôle, the Germans had their defensive tactic ready. It was economical, it was effective, and we did not during the whole Italian campaign find any entirely satisfactory answer to it. When we force the Germans from one position to another, it has normally been the result of overwhelming weight of metal. I suppose you can smash anything if you have a large enough hammer, but it is not a very satisfactory way of doing things. It was not the method of Hannibal, or of Cæsar, or of Charles XII, or of Marlborough (except, perhaps, at the ill-advised battle of Malplaquet), or of Napoleon.

From my rather sweeping strictures of British military theory and practice I exclude such military writers as General Fuller, who frequently seems to me to have been some jumps ahead of the other British military theorists. General Fuller has held no command during this war. His politics are not mine, and they are not politics which commend themselves to the bulk of the nation. But I wish it had been possible for him to have been given high employment. I wish it had been possible for Mr. Churchill to appoint him, quoting as he did so Cromwell's pregnant words :

"Sir, the State in requiring men to serve her takes no notice of their opinions."

The part played by the R.A.F. and the American Air Force in the conquest of Sicily was of profound significance. In the hands of Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder the Allied Mediterranean Air Force had become, I venture to suggest, perhaps the most potent instrument of war that has ever been fashioned. The tremendous and sustained preliminary bombardments that preceded the invasion not only destroyed the bulk of the Axis planes that were available for attacks on our convoys at sea or our troops on the landing beaches, they compelled the re-

mainder to keep their heads down. They denied the enemy movement in the air, and consequently they denied him observation. After the close of the Tunisian campaign it was estimated that the Axis had as many as 250 or 300 fighter planes on the Gerbini and Catania airfields alone, while in the whole of Sicily and Southern Italy they possessed at least 400 long-range bombers. Our air forces pounded these unmercifully. The use of the fragmentation bomb proved highly successful in the work of aircraft destruction, since air bombing became much less of a hit-or-miss affair. By July 10 not more than twenty or thirty enemy fighters were available to stem the first wave of our assaults in Sicily; nine-tenths of their fighter strength had been eliminated before a single soldier had landed.

Of the immunity enjoyed by our convoys at sea I have spoken earlier. It was the most remarkable tribute that could have been paid to the effectiveness of Tedder's air strategy.

As the Sicilian campaign developed the effectiveness of the Luftwaffe declined by almost constant arithmetical progression. There were a few spectacular but not very effective raids on the ports and an occasional quick hit and run attack on some forward positions. But these latter were extraordinarily capricious affairs. The German planes always seemed much more concerned with unloading their bombs and getting off as fast as they could rather than with selecting their target with any particular care. I was "not amused" when a 20 mm. cannon shell landed in my jeep (I was not in the jeep at the time) one afternoon near Catenanuova, and for some reason failed to explode. (Perhaps it was not a 20 mm. shell, but my driver, who knew more about these things than I, thought it was). But cases of that kind were rare.

Sicily was rich in tactical lessons. We had experimented embryonically with paratroops, and although the operation miscarried in many places and the achievements of these troops fell short of expectations, I do not feel that they were by any means a total failure. At the Anapo bridge, just south of Syracuse, and at Prima Sole they substantially achieved their objectives, and elsewhere even when they were dropped far from their targets they were able to do a good deal of damage. The fact that we were able to land six-pounder anti-tank guns

with the parachutists at Prima Sole was of prime importance as a landmark in the development of paratroop warfare. Given anti-tank guns, parachutists are reasonably secure against their greatest danger—that of being overrun by tanks. The lesson that did pre-eminently emerge from these airborne operations was the need for a higher degree of training among the pilots who were responsible for carrying the paratroops and towing the gliders to their destination. For the Sicilian operation—so one had the impression—they were far from adequately trained, and in face of strong anti-aircraft fire they appear, in some cases, to have lost their heads.

The technique of paratroop warfare has not developed during the last four years so fast as might have been expected, but Sicily confirmed my impression that there are immense potentialities ahead of it.

It was a time of transition so far as tank warfare was concerned. We went into Sicily with only one type of tank, the Sherman, and this was employed less as an assault weapon than as light, mobile, supporting artillery. Here again one heard complaints about the training of the tank crews, and men of the Durham Light Infantry who had to fight their way forward across the Simeto were rather bitter about the inability of the tanks to go ahead in the face of what they were convinced was often only machine-gun opposition.

That we suffered in our pursuit of what Captain Cyril Falls calls "the undeviating thrust," through being excessively road-bound has been previously demonstrated. Apart from the partial solution which I have suggested, it had become clear that we should have to learn to become more dependent on mule-borne supplies and less on wheeled transport. In view of the heavy burden placed upon the sappers in this type of warfare I have heard it suggested that infantry should receive a more detailed training in mine detection and mine lifting. The infantryman has to become an Admirable Crichton in modern war, and more stress needs to be put on his training.

Training, co-ordination, audacity—those are the three master principles that seem to me to be deducible from the lessons of Sicily. Troops need more and yet more training in modern battle tactics. You need closer co-ordination between your

various services and the different arms of each service. Paratroops will be worthlessly sacrificed unless their employment is closely co-ordinated with that of the ground forces; the army and the air force must operate essentially as one body, not as two. That has always been one of General Montgomery's basic principles in war. But, given adequate training and the fullest degree of co-ordination, you will never reap the full fruits of a campaign without audacity. In the long run it is possible that more battles are lost through over-caution than through an excess of rashness. There was plenty of audacity apparent both in the planning and the execution of the opening moves in Sicily. It is not so obvious that audacity was so marked a characteristic of our operations during the final phase.

# PART TWO

## ITALY





## X. "We Fought at Arques . . ."

"Go, hang yourself, brave Crillon! we fought at Arques and you were not there."

*Henry of Navarre.*

FOR some days we lived comfortably enough in an abandoned hotel in Taormina. Once or twice we drove up to Messina and gazed across the straits through binoculars at the mainland of Italy around Reggio. It looked very still and very deserted. We found one or two shops open in Taormina and bought presents for our womenfolk. We breakfasted late and bathed in the sea. I found a copy of "Barchester Towers" and re-read it with delight. I also lighted on a copy of my favourite cricket story, "Spedigue's Dropper." In the evenings we played bridge. It was all very pleasant. And meanwhile we were waiting, as the long August days dropped languidly towards the close of the month, for the next phase to open.

We soon knew pretty clearly what was going to happen. Italy was to be invaded. That, indeed, had been obvious to us all before the Sicilian campaign closed. The Eighth Army was to land at the extreme southern tip of the Calabrian peninsula and work its way up the toe of Italy. If it found its progress unduly checked by road demolitions it would eject the German defenders by a series of seaborne landings in their rear. It was not anticipated, however, that the enemy would make any very prolonged or determined attempt to hold the toe.

But the main assault was to be made by an Anglo-American force much farther up the west coast in the Gulf of Salerno at the extreme range of fighter protection from Sicily. The landing at Reggio was to be little more than a diversion, with the aim of drawing down as many German troops as possible to the south. It was hoped that the Salerno landing would be effected without difficulty, since it was understood that the coast in this neighbourhood was defended only by weak and demoralised Italian units who would hand over possession to us as soon as our troops disembarked. This seemed the more probable, as

negotiations for the unconditional surrender of Italy were well advanced and the actual signature of the armistice occurred on September 3, the day on which the Eighth Army landed in Calabria, although the news was not published until five days later.

Having established their bridghead, the Anglo-American force would seize the port of Naples to ensure a base for supply. They would then be in a position to cut across the ankle of Italy and obtain possession of the very important airfields around Foggia, which formed one of the major objectives of the landing. In the process it was hoped that such German troops as were to the south of the Naples-Foggia line would be cut off and compelled to surrender. After that the march on Rome would commence. It was not thought that the Germans would be able to bring any adequate number of troops to oppose our advance, and it was hoped, a trifle optimistically, that Italian armed opposition would keep them pinned down in the north. After the capture of Rome, where an entire airborne Division was originally to have been dropped, it was presumed that little opposition would be offered to our advance until we reached the line of the Po, and we all began to look forward to wintering in Florence or its neighbourhood.

It was a plan that proved more ingenious on paper than in reality. In the first place, it lacked the advantage of surprise. The Germans guessed pretty shrewdly where we proposed to land. Their military commentator, Sertorius, in a broadcast about August 25, gave a remarkably accurate forecast of our plans. The probability was, he said, that our main landing would be made in the neighbourhood of Salerno and Naples, though there was likely to be a subsidiary disembarkation in Calabria. Under the circumstances, therefore, it was unlikely that the Germans would obligingly leave Italian troops to defend the vital stretch of coast from Naples to Pæstum. And a day or two before our disembarkation there they brought German divisions in to replace the Italians who had, as anticipated, been perfectly ready to hand over to us without making any show of opposition. Again, the landing in Calabria, which was timed to start six days before the larger operation in the north, though it went with the smoothness of a peace-time manœuvre, failed to attract any important German force down into the toe.

The bait was a little too obvious for such a wily old fish as Kesselring. The fact that there was only room for two divisions to operate up the Calabrian toe (the Fifth Division up the western side and the First Canadian up the eastern) and that even these divisions could only employ one brigade and sometimes only one battalion in the line at a time meant that the enemy could not fail to realise that the bulk of our striking force, including all the American divisions, was being held back for action elsewhere.

Finally, Italian resistance to the Germans proved almost everywhere entirely negligible. It is difficult to see how we could possibly have imagined that it would be otherwise, for the Italians were even more frightened of the Germans than they were of us. With very few exceptions they no longer wanted to fight on behalf of anyone or anything; they just wanted to extricate themselves from the war and get home.

Naturally, we all wanted to be on the Salerno landing. No one wants to take part in a village cricket match if he has a chance of playing in a Test Match. But we were thwarted. The people who decide such things decided that the great majority of British correspondents should accompany the bloodless hike of Montgomery's two divisions up Calabria. Only one British newspaper, the *Daily Herald*, was represented on the Salerno landing. I am sorry to start airing this professional dirty linen once more, but it is an example of what can happen when there is egregious inefficiency in the organisation of these things. The newspapers naturally wanted their correspondents to accompany the Salerno landing force; the public—one must suppose—wanted fuller reports from the larger operation; the correspondents themselves wanted to go with it. But it was not permitted.

To add to our troubles, most of the transport that we had been using in Sicily was impounded for use on the Salerno operation. As Alan Moorehead put it, “It really required a stroke of something approaching genius to arrange that all the transport was sent to one place while all the correspondents were left in another.”

It was even worse than that. We were told that, with two or three exceptions, we should not even be allowed to accom-

pany the minor Calabrian landing. As only two Divisions would be operating, it was felt to be unnecessary to have more than two Correspondents reporting their operations! When we heard that, we nearly gave the whole thing up in despair. Moorehead suggested that we had better go up into the hills and write Nature Notes for our newspapers, as it was being made absolutely impossible for us to report the war at all. Ultimately he and Clifford borrowed a truck from the Army Film Unit and disappeared with it. Four of us who found ourselves stranded in this way in Sicily—Dan Deluce, Ronald Monson, Donald Munro and myself—managed to acquire the use of a pre-historical Humber that looked as if it had come out of a museum. It was a great deal better than nothing, however, and we covered a good many hundred miles in it during the course of the next few weeks.

The first landing was timed to take place in the early hours of Friday, September 3, the fourth anniversary of Britain's entry into the war. It was to be heralded by a heavy concentration of artillery fire from our gun positions around and above Messina, and at 4.30 a.m. the invasion ships were to cross the three-mile strip of water and troops of the Fifth Division and the First Canadian Division would disembark on the mainland of Europe along a five-mile stretch immediately north of Reggio. For several days our artillery had been at work pin-pointing and silencing enemy batteries across the Straits, and for two or three days a small force of British Commando troops, about sixteen men in all, had been established on the further shore. In view of their reports, and other indications that there was very little likelihood of serious opposition on the beaches, it seemed rather unnecessary and wasteful that the bombardment, which was to start at 3.45 a.m. on the morning of September 3, should still have gone forward according to plan. There was very little evidence that there were any guns left in the neighbourhood of the beaches. Personally, I believe that the preliminary bombardment could have perfectly well been dispensed with, but it had been elaborately planned, and I suppose it is not easy to call off these things.

“WE FOUGHT AT ARQUES . . .”

And so, punctually at a quarter to four, the darkness was rent with the sudden flash and crack of gunfire, and the landing craft slid out into the narrows. The battle for Europe was beginning.

The great bombardment, one of the biggest since Alamein, aimed first at making the opposite shore along a ten-mile stretch from Scylla to Reggio untenable by the enemy, if there were any enemy still there; secondly, it sought to destroy such batteries as had not already been put out of action, if there were any such. The pin-pointing of these gun positions was, of course, a very different task from that with which our gunners had been presented at Alamein. In the earlier battle the flat and featureless desert had provided no natural observation posts; here, from the ridges above Messina, we overlooked the enemy positions to an extent most unusual in warfare. On the other hand, the desert gave little or no opportunity to the defender to conceal his batteries; the ridges and gulleys of Calabria afforded plenty of natural cover. Again, the country was not suitable for the employment of the method of locating the enemy guns known as “sound spotting,” and we were therefore compelled to rely to a much greater extent than at Alamein on “flash spotting.”

It might have made a difference if the enemy had had any guns with which to reply, but the opposite coast remained dead and unresponsive except where an occasional vivid splash of red flame told of some building that had been hit by a British shell.

And still there was no reply.

The first intensive salvo against the beaches opposite lasted nine minutes. There was a pause, and then our guns, lengthening their range, began to plaster the sites where the enemy batteries had been or might be.

And meanwhile our ships were sliding through the waters towards Europe.

Morning dawned, mistily golden. After a night of intermittent, interrupted sleep on a bed of damp pine needles in a wood close to the headquarters of the Army Group Artillery. I had risen to watch the bombardment. As day broke the landmarks on the opposite shore began to disengage them-

selves from the morning mist. On the extreme left I saw the rock of Scylla, jutting abruptly out to sea and looking not unlike the foot of a gigantic sphinx. In the immediate foreground a patch of oily-looking sea, which is occasionally subject to this day to violent commotions, indicated the site of the legendary Charybdis. Following the coast round I could see the little chain of fishing villages, the immediate objectives of our landing-craft, and further south the town of Reggio. Behind Reggio a light-coloured splash of earth indicated the position of the airfield which had been so repeatedly bombed in the last few nights and which had now been ploughed up by the enemy. But I knew that within a very few hours the R.A.F. would be operating fighters from it.

The beauty of the morning, as the heat of the sun gradually sucked up the mist, and my own drowsiness, lulled me into a reminiscent mood. September the Third. Four years back on that same day I had been in Warsaw, miserably apprehensive about the rapid movements of the German Panzer Divisions into western Poland. (They were very cheerful in Warsaw that day, despite the bombings, for news came through about mid-day that a state of war existed between Britain and Germany, and half the population of the capital surged cheering towards the house of the British Consul-General, Frank Savery. But I had felt miserable and lonely and scared. I was wondering whether I should ever get out of Poland alive.)

The calendar in my mind moved forward a year. I was in Athens. France had gone, and the whole of civilised Europe had tumbled about our ears. The only reality left seemed to be the brutal triumphant leer of Nazi Germany—that, and the magnificent protean figure of Winston Churchill holding, so it seemed, the skies suspended, in Housman's noble phrase, and defying, from a Lilliputian island in the west, the monstrous force of evil that had engulfed Europe. Those were the days of the Battle of Britain. Every morning in Athens we listened tensely to the B.B.C. news bulletins and learned of more and yet more German aircraft destroyed. We wondered how long the R.A.F. could keep it up. We wondered how long it would be before Mussolini struck at Greece. And we wondered what precarious bluff General Wavell (who then was hardly even a

name to us) was employing in the Egyptian Desert to hold Graziani's quarter of a million of men at bay.

September, 1941. Cairo. One of those strange and happy lulls that occur at the very height of the tempest of war. For the tide of battle had swung towards Russia, and the Middle East was, for the time being, secure. Incredibly one had time for one's own personal life. One had time to be happy.

Another twelve months and I was at Alamein. September 3, 1942, was the day of the turning of the tide. Three days earlier Rommel had swung his troops forward for their last offensive. He had told them that Alexandria was within their grasp and that the final defeat of the British Army of the Middle East was on the point of achievement. But there was a new General in command of the Eighth Army. His name was Montgomery, and he had told his officers that the army would retreat no further; it would fight where it stood. Rommel had attacked. For three days he had felt for a weak point in the British line, and on the fourth day, which was September 3, he abandoned the attempt and began to retreat.

That was a year ago, and in the twelve months that had followed we had marched from Alamein to Tripoli, to Tunis, into Sicily, and now we were about to enter Europe.

Before it was quite daylight I groped my way into the Headquarters Mess of the Army Group Artillery. I found a sort of cafeteria breakfast of tea and sausage rolls being served out. After a chilly and broken night it proved very welcome. Officers dropped in constantly, rapidly swallowed a cup of tea, munched a sausage roll and disappeared as silently as they had come.

But it was time to think of paying a visit to Europe. With Monson, Deluce and Munro I drove downhill in the archaeological Humber to a fishing village on the coast which bore the pleasantly frivolous name of Milli Marina. We had thought it might be difficult to get across, since General Montgomery did not encourage unauthorised visitors when a fresh and critical operation was beginning.

But there was no difficulty at all. A number of "ducks" were on the point of crossing with a cargo of petrol, and the



officer in charge told us that we could hop aboard any of them. It was nine o'clock in the morning now, and the mist had dispersed. We knew that the beaches on the further shore had been cleared more than three hours earlier, and that our troops were already pushing along the road towards Reggio. What was more remarkable was that there was no indication of any hostile action by the enemy. Which ever way one looked, one saw the files of British shipping, sedately crossing the Straits, sailing at nicely spaced intervals with a precision that suggested a peace-time naval review in the Solent. Overhead, aircraft hummed from time to time, but they were our own aircraft.

It was a lovely morning on which to visit Europe. The sky was now cloudless, and there was not a ripple to disturb the glassy surface of the sea. Try as I could I was totally unable to associate this tranquil morning trip with the "amphibious operation of peculiar hazard and complexity" of which Mr. Churchill had spoken. Not a gun could be observed to fire from the further shore, and the American battery far up in the hills behind us which from time to time tossed off an occasional volley, seemed rather to convey a hint to the enemy of trouble in store for them once the bulk of the Eighth Army got ashore than any more urgent threat.

It was just about as hazardous an undertaking as the crossing from Southsea to the Isle of Wight in peace-time. Just before eleven our "duck" swept majestically on to the narrow sandy beach of Catona and drove straight on through a wispy plantation of palms to the high road beyond. That beach provided the first surprise. When we landed in Sicily in July, although the actual human resistance was slight, all the beaches of any size around the south-east coast of the island had at least been protected with barbed wire against our impending attack and had frequently been mined as well. Here there had been no attempt at wiring the beaches, and during the whole of that Friday on which we landed, our sappers detected only half a dozen mines. Nor had the houses been booby-trapped, although many of the inhabitants had evacuated themselves from the neighbourhood weeks earlier.

As I drove ashore ships were disembarking their cargoes—

guns, tanks, petrol, stores—to left and right. Men in green field uniforms were eagerly assisting in the unloading.

I rubbed my eyes and looked again. There could be no doubt about it. This was the Italian defending force, and they were queueing up to help the invaders to disembark their equipment and stores!

I asked a British soldier what the landing had been like and why the Italians were being so willing. Apparently, the Germans had left them once more in the lurch, withdrawing northwards two or three days earlier. And so the Italian coastal defence troops had simply waited until the first British landing-craft had touched their shores and then, emerging from the few trenches and pillboxes in the neighbourhood, had streamed down to the beaches to assist in the unloading. They were neither resentful nor melancholy at the fate which had overtaken them, but seemed rather eager than otherwise, as though anticipating an appropriate tip for their services.

I do not suppose that in the history of the world there has ever been a case of an invading army being met by its opponents on the shores of their native land with a touching of caps and requests to "Carry your bag, sir?"

Of course, these chaps had lost all pretence of regarding themselves as soldiers any longer. They simply wanted an opportunity of taking up their civilian life and their civilian work again. Doubtless, too, dim racial memories of the open-handedness of British and American tourists in the distant days of peace were stirring in their subconscious. Centuries-old recollections of English milords distributing largesse as they rolled through Italy on the Grand Tour. And so Italian eyes glistened with cupidity and Italian palms itched towards the equipment of their conquerors. For the peasants of the Kingdom of Naples, so reluctant as warriors, were reverting to type.

And meanwhile the men of the Eighth Army were making themselves at home on the beach itself. I saw that most familiar of all scenes—the "brew up." For good or ill the British soldier to-day works and marches and fights on tea. Give him ten minutes' leisure and somehow he will produce all the apparatus necessary for his brew up. I had watched him brew up at every halt across the desert between Alamein and Tripoli

during the previous winter, and I have little doubt that he will brew up, if the opportunity occurs, on the steps of St. Peter's and on the pavements of the Wilhelmstrasse.

It is an interesting and perhaps a profitable subject for reverie. One supposes that the men who fought under Cromwell and Marlborough fought upon English ale; one knows that rum formed a preliminary pick-me-up to the bloody infantry assaults on the Western Front during the last war. The British soldier in the Mediterranean has seldom been able to obtain beer (during the latter part of the period that I was there his ration was, in theory, one bottle per week per man—if he got it, but he usually didn't). So it is just as well that he has such a positively Johnsonian attachment to tea. I wonder whether he fights better or worse as the result. I won't attempt to dogmatise on this matter, though it is a deliciously provocative topic. This all-round tendency towards asceticism with regard to the pleasures of the table is matched by a corresponding, and I think rather sinister, development of pride in asceticism for its own sake.

Take cricketers. If you read Nyren's "Cricketers' Companion" you will learn how the giants of early nineteenth-century cricket—Fuller Pilch and the rest—used to demolish immense rounds of beef and cavernous flagons of ale. Nyren recalls the fact with pride and awe. I wish I had my copy at hand, so that I could quote the passage. Then turn on the leaves another century and read how Mr. X., the celebrated batsman, is a teetotaller, a vegetarian and a non-smoker, lives on nuts, hygienic biscuits and lettuce-leaves hand-picked by his admirers, and would probably swoon if anyone offered him a glass of beer.

Well, I suppose we are entering upon a brave new world, but it is not a new world which I regard with any particular enthusiasm. There will be no room for Jack Falstaff in it.

"They order, said I, this matter better in France."

Let us hope that they will continue to do so after the war is over.

But we are on the beach at Reggio on the morning of the invasion of Europe, and it is neither the time nor the place to indulge in gastronomic reverie. It was still more than an hour short of noon, but already army workshops and field dressing

stations were established in and around the neighbouring villages. I walked along the road towards the nearest dressing station, as I wanted to know what casualties we had suffered in the landing:

The Medical Officer greeted me at the entrance.

“Step inside,” he said. “We are beginning to get things fitted up here . . . Casualties? Well, there was no fighting here at all. I only have two patients at present. One has rather bad boils, the other slipped and sprained his ankle getting off the landing-craft this morning. That’s all.”

And there you have the quintessence of the Reggio landing: Italian soldiers helping us to unload, British Tommies brewing up on the beach, and a single sprained ankle in the field dressing station.

There was no difficulty about getting a lift into Reggio. The town had been occupied without opposition by 9.30 that morning, and within four hours the neighbouring airfield was ready for use by fighter planes. The Italian ground staff were already repairing it when we arrived. Already transport of the First Canadian Division, whose patrols had occupied the town, was pouring down the main road. I hopped on to a Staff car and entered just as noon was striking.

Reggio was simply another repetition of the many bomb-desolated towns I had seen in the past few weeks. As usual, the vast majority of its inhabitants seemed to have fled, and I only saw two or three dozen out of the town’s peace-time population of sixty thousand. Their reaction was similar to that of the people of the more heavily bombed towns of Sicily. They viewed us with apathy and indifference, but cried out “*Viva Inglese*” when I produced a tin of bully beef. Three pathetic old crones clutched my hands in their skinny fingers, almost pawing me for food. There was a little group of Carabinieri in one of the side streets. They came running up like obedient puppy-dogs when I beckoned, but all they could tell me was that there was no food in the town, that more than two thousand of the inhabitants had been killed in air raids and the remainder, except for a few score, had fled to the mountains. The mayor had gone off with the Germans. As I stood talking to them our tanks began to enter the town. One after another twenty-three Shermans raced inexorably down the

main street and disappeared at the further end. They were following up as support artillery to the Canadian Division which was now moving up the east coast road towards Locri, but as yet there was no evidence that there would be anything for them to oppose. The Germans had cleared out of this area during the last days of August. We found only three German graves near Reggio. The date on each was September 1. We captured that day a solitary German prisoner, and from somewhere in the neighbourhood of Scylla a single machine-gun was momentarily opposing our advance. But that was all.

There now followed ten days of monotonous uneventful advance up the coast of Calabria. The Fifth Division, now commanded by Major-General G. B. Bucknall, advanced by the road which runs up the west coast, the Canadians, under Major-General Simmonds, advanced by the corresponding road up the east coast. Originally, I believe, it had been intended that the Canadians should do no more than cover the butt end of the peninsula, but as they met with no opposition they just went on going on.

For the first day or two there was no sign even of the customary road demolitions, but as we advanced further up the coast these old friends began to recur. Day after day it was exactly the same story. Our troops advanced, mainly on foot, since few transport vehicles had as yet been disembarked. They tramped on up the coastal roads until they reached a demolition or a blown-up bridge. Then they had to sit down and wait until the sappers arrived to repair it. Then they were able to continue their march until they came up against the next demolition. There was virtually no fighting, for the German Twenty-Ninth Panzer Grenadier Division was falling back northwards and showed no signs of seeking battle. During the first week I scarcely heard more than half a dozen shells fired, and I certainly never saw a German soldier.

Every day was an exact repetition of its predecessor, and it became increasingly hard to ring the changes in one's despatches from day to day. Sometimes the demolitions were quickly repaired, sometimes they took longer. Once, near Bagnara, the route had to be diverted on to the railway line and through

a couple of tunnels. I had never before driven in a car through a railway tunnel, and it is not an experience to be altogether recommended. We had to drive the archaeological Humber with headlights full on over the surface of rough stones on which the track was laid. It reminded me of some of the worst bits of bumpy driving in the wastes of Libya. At the entrance of each tunnel our engineers had placed large notices bearing stringent exhortations: "Keep hundred yards interval between the vehicles"; "Switch off your engine if you stop, or you will be asphyxiated." The smell in the tunnels reminded me of that odour peculiar to Paris underground railways, and which I had always previously assumed to be disinfectant.

It was almost as uneventful a week as any I have spent in the field, but it was not without its consolations. There are more unpleasant ways of passing ten days in early September than driving along a country road with the blue Mediterranean constantly at hand on one's left and with a daily increasing abundance of autumnal fruits crying out to be picked. Usually we didn't need to pick them; the villagers thrust them on us. There is a type of grape in this neighbourhood that has a rather individual strawberry-like flavour; it may be well known to specialists on fruit, but to me it was quite new. And there were apples and pears and figs and lemons and blackberries in profusion.

It was pleasant also to feel that one was really in Europe. I don't know why the three miles of water between Messina and Reggio should make so much difference, but they undoubtedly do. Calabria is distinctly European in a sense that Sicily is not European. You can't pin the difference down to any one feature. The contours are different; the tints are subtly dissimilar, more varied and softer in their shades. After two blazing Egyptian summers, two bitter bleak desert winters, one was grateful to have enjoyed in the course of a single year the brilliant wild flowers which carpeted Tunisia during a brief and glorious month of spring, and the "Majesty Septembrál" (to employ the noble phrase of Hilaire Belloc in the noblest poem he ever wrote). Spring had been a gay and vivid fairyland, and now autumn was providing a cornucopia of fruits. And it was only very rarely during these days that the report of

a gun and the long whine of a shell uncivilly interrupted this pleasant pastoral.

By this time Italy was in spirit an ally. The population flocked out of the villages to greet British troops with baskets of fruit and flowers; whenever they were able, they gave us information about the movements of German troops; they concealed and fed British and American prisoners until the arrival of our forces. This last represented a refreshing break with tradition, since throughout the war the Italians had had a consistently worse record than the Germans in their treatment of prisoners.

In my diary I find the following significant entry for September 6:

"The war is over for the Italian people and the Italian soldiers, only Badoglio doesn't seem to have realised it yet."

I was ill-informed. Marshal Badoglio's representative had signed an armistice with the Allies three days earlier, but the news had not yet been published, since our High Command wished to keep the Germans in the dark about this development until the Salerno landing should take place.

Yet it was an unsatisfactory period from many points of view. We all felt envious of those who were to take part in the Salerno operation, and in particular we felt uneasy that Montgomery and his Eighth Army should be confined to a walking tour up the roads of Calabria while the vital assault at Salerno was to be entrusted, in part at any rate, to comparatively untried divisions. It seemed to be tempting Providence. I don't know that we formulated any concrete theories about what was going to happen at Salerno. The Italians with whom I talked during those days did not believe that the Germans would go back as far as the Po without making a stand in central Italy; they thought that they would endeavour to hold us south of Naples. They were right.

There was one little episode during these days that occasioned almost the only armed clash that occurred during the Calabrian campaign. In order to speed up the northward retreat of the Germans a landing operation was carried out on the morning of September 8 at Pizzo, a small coastal town about fifty miles

north of Reggio. The unit employed to make the landing was my old friend 231 Brigade, with whom I had sailed from Suez at the beginning of July and with whom I had disembarked in Sicily.

Monson, Deluce, Munro and myself were at that time quartered at Palmi, about thirty miles short of Pizzo, with Captain Charles Kessler of the Public Relations unit. We decided that there were not likely to be many Germans in between and therefore we would drive ahead and try to link up with this fresh landing. Even by this time we were a bit blasé about preceding the advance of the army, for it had lost its novelty, though in fact our most sensational experience of this nature was still to come. But it seemed to offer some prospects of a "story" and we were sick of writing about demolitions.

It took some time to reach the van of the army that day, for there were a couple of rivers to be crossed. The bridges having been destroyed, our tireless engineers had got to work constructing a more or less artificial ford. Bulldozers went to it, tossing earth into the bed of the river. Then a double thickness of cocoa-nut matting was laid from bank to bank. On top of this was spread length upon length of firm wire netting, pinned down to the matting by stakes driven deep into the river bed. It made a surprisingly good extemporised ford, and, like everything the sappers did during those arduous weeks, it was completed in a shorter time than I would have believed humanly possible. The sappers never get much of a write-up in war. Theirs is the least glamorous of jobs, and nowadays it is one of the most dangerous since mine-detection is a terribly hazardous affair. Even the Hoover-like detector has its limitations; it cannot spot the box-mine encased in wood. There are plenty of heroics about the sapper's job, but they are not of the kind which frequently attracts attention. Readers of Conan Doyle's "Brigadier Gerard" stories may recall that when Napoleon threatened to transfer the over-presumptuous brigadier to the sappers that dashing cavalry officer winced and paled. Most of us, I take leave to suggest, would do the same if faced with the prospect of the dangerous and nerve-straining job of mine detection alternating with strenuous bouts of filling in road craters with shovel and pick under a blazing Mediterranean sun.



There were no further obstacles after we had crossed the second of the two rivers, and we bowled along northward in the Archæological towards Pizzo. The villages through which we passed were full of cheering throngs, more enthusiastic than we had ever yet seen them. To slow down one's car was to invite eager hands to thrust in baskets of fruit and even handfuls of cigarettes, which must have meant much more of a sacrifice to the people. To halt was fatal. Instantly the crowd would begin to surge round the Humber, leaping on to the running-board for the privilege of shaking an Englishman by the hand. All these villages of Calabria had escaped the bombing and shelling which had been the fate of so many of their less fortunate Sicilian sisters and therefore we were in less doubt about the spontaneity of our reception. But there was another reason for its warmth, although we did not yet realise what it was.

We arrived at Vibo Valentia, a hilltop stronghold whose origin dates back to the period of Greek colonisation in Southern Italy six hundred years before Christ. We entered the town with three of our Bren carriers which formed the extreme forward tip of the vanguard of the Eighth Army. The entire population seemed to be in the streets. They carried banners inscribed with the words "*Viva Inglese*," "*Viva Italia Libera*," "*Viva Giacomo Matteotti*." They waved home-made Union Jacks and Stars and Stripes. Some of these were quite well and elaborately painted and must have represented days and even weeks of careful work. That in itself was significant.

A stout, elderly man, who seemed to have appointed himself master of the ceremonies, rushed hither and thither among the townsfolk distributing typewritten sheets of paper which welcomed the British and American troops in the name of the city of Vibo Valentia, accompanied by references to Garibaldi and Michele Morelli. As soon as he saw our car he rushed up to us and flinging his arms round the neck of Ronald Monson, planted a large, moist, smacking kiss upon his cheek. Monson is a rugged, undemonstrative Australian, not normally accustomed to this form of greeting, but he bore it with a tolerably good grace, and it was only afterwards that he gave vent to his favourite remark, which I have heard him employ a score

of times when misfortune of one sort or another overtook him :  
" Why does it always happen to *me* ? "

The Carabinieri were drawn up in front of us, their smart, well-kept uniforms contrasting rather sharply with the grubby and unpretentious shirts and shorts worn by the occupants of the Bren carriers and ourselves. They seemed anxious for the formal handing over of the town with the maximum of *éclat* and display, and they obviously had a lot that they wanted to talk about. But we were anxious to push on and contact elements of the Pizzo landing party which could not, we judged, be upwards of three or four miles distant. So leaving the occupants of the Bren carriers to deal with the mayor and the speeches and the rest of it, we drove off down the road towards Pizzo in the fast-gathering dusk.

The road slid steeply downhill. Night would soon be on us now, and I was beginning to wonder what were our prospects of making contact with 231 Brigade in unfamiliar country after dark, when a sharp and urgent exclamation from a figure standing in the shadow by the roadside caused our driver to pull up with a squealing of tortured brakes.

" You *bloody* fool ! " said the voice.

Realising that we were, collectively, the bloody fool implied, we stepped rather sheepishly out of the Archæological. A torch was flashed in our faces.

" Are you English ? Eighth Army ? Good ! "

We had encountered the foremost man of 231 Brigade whom we had sought all day. We learned from him that the landing had met with a good deal of opposition in the course of the morning from dive-bombers and one or two 88 mm. guns. There was believed to have been as many as three German battalions in the neighbourhood, but after the early fighting they had pulled out and retreated. Our landing force, however, had not expected to link up with the main body of Eighth Army for another twenty-four hours, and the corporal who met us had been sent out on a mine-laying expedition based on the assumption that enemy rearguards were still in occupation of Vibo Valentia, and that it would be necessary to mine the road in its vicinity as a defensive precaution.

We had, as a matter of fact, driven our car slap over one of his mines.

And then we learned the news which dwarfed the whole episode of the Pizzo landing.

The unconditional surrender of Italy had been announced over the radio at five o'clock that afternoon. The armistice had been signed on September 3, the day on which Eighth Army landed in Italy. By its terms the Italian forces facing the British and Americans were to lay down their arms, but they were to resist attempts from other quarters (i.e. the Germans) to disarm them. The same terms applied to the Italian troops in the Balkans. The Italian fleet was to be handed over to the British naval officer in chief at Malta for subsequent employment against the Germans in the Mediterranean. British and American forces were to be granted full use of Italian cities, ports, roads and railways, to facilitate their task of expelling the Germans from the kingdom.

It was, or it seemed then to be, the beginning of the end.

Events were now moving with a dramatic quickening of tempo, and the next two or three weeks witnessed what I think one must regard as the climax of the 1943 campaign; perhaps, in some sense, the climax of three years of war in the Mediterranean. The surrender of Italy had been announced that afternoon. Before dawn on the following morning Anglo-American forces composing the Fifth Army under General Mark W. Clark landed along a stretch of coast approximately twenty miles in length from Salerno to a point south of Paestum.

As I have indicated earlier, the landing was not unanticipated by the Germans. It was sufficiently obvious that our invasion of Italy would not be limited to a two-divisional operation northwards from the most southerly tip of the peninsular. The Germans clearly expected us to land in the bays of Naples and Salerno, and had made their military dispositions accordingly, but they were prepared for disembarkations elsewhere. A flurry of rumours was buzzing round Europe. The foreign correspondents in neutral countries were having a good time, busily speculating. The correspondent of a famous Swedish newspaper, writing from Switzerland, stated, on the morning that

we landed at Salerno, that "according to absolutely reliable reports" we had made landings at Gæta, Civita Vecchia and Pisa. And other guesses were freely canvassed, Genoa being a particular favourite.

The northern landings were made by the British Tenth Corps. This unit which had comprised the body of the British armour at Alamein had subsequently taken part in the pursuit and the final break-through to Tunis. Its commander, General Horrocks, was one of the men who had come out with Montgomery to take over a corps in the desert after the "Tobruk inquest" in the summer of 1942. I can think of no British commander who had made a more profound impression upon me on the few occasions on which I had then met him. Alexander and Montgomery have justly earned great reputations. Eveleigh and Keightley and other Corps and Divisional commanders have proved their worth in North Africa and Italy. I never knew Wavell, and, not having been in the desert for the "first round," I never quite fell under the spell of that fine soldier, "Straffer" Gott (Commander of the Seventh Armoured Division and Commander-designate of Eighth Army when he lost his life in the desert in August, 1942, shot down in the air by a German Messerschmitt).

Horrocks struck me as possessed of quite exceptional qualities of clear-mindedness and decision. I do not myself think that a war correspondent's estimate of the respective merits of senior commanders is of very much value. One cannot know enough of the circumstances which condition their decisions and their actions. One is not competent, when attempting to allocate credit or the reverse for a particular divisional action, to decide what share of the responsibility is to be attributed respectively to the Divisional commander, Corps commander, Army commander and Army Group commander. One is only justified in summing up a General on the basis of the personal impression which he makes and on a consistent body of achievement whether successful or the reverse. About Horrocks I have never had any doubts at all. He is a great General.

My two most vivid recollections of Horrocks were, first, during the last days of August, 1942, when Eighth Army, with its back to the wall at Alamein and a summer of defeats behind

it, awaited Rommel's last attack. Horrocks talked to the troops and correspondents at his Corps headquarters. He told us the various moves which the Germans were likely to make and the way in which we were going to counter them. In every particular his forecasts were absolutely accurate. One felt at the time that he was right, and he was able to transfer this feeling of assurance to his listeners. The second occasion was on the afternoon of the day that we entered Tunis. Alan Moorehead, Alex Clifford and myself met him at the road junction at La Mornaghia, four or five miles out of Tunis. With perfect clarity he explained to us in three minutes just how the operation then developing could be turned into a genuine "blitz" on the old 1940 scale. He showed us how the German army in Tunisia could be disintegrated, just as in fact it was disintegrated three or four days later. And again he was absolutely right.

By one of the exasperating tragedies of this war General Horrocks, while watching a German air raid on the port of Bizerta, where he was stationed at the time, was so badly wounded as to put an end to his active career in the field.\*

The Corps was now under the command of General McCreary, an exceedingly able and intellectual officer, formerly chief of staff to General Alexander. It consisted of Forty-Sixth Division (Major-General Hawkesworth), which had fought in Tunisia, and Fifty-Sixth Division (Major-General Templar), which had arrived in North Africa just in time to take part in Eighth Army's last battles around Enfidaville. As support, Seventh Armoured Division (Major-General Erskine), the old Desert Rats, were to come in later.

On the American sector further south Forty-Fifth U.S. Division, who had fought in Sicily, landed near the mouth of the Sele river, and Thirty-Sixth U.S. Division, composed of fresh troops without previous battle experience, disembarked around Pæstum. American Rangers, the equivalent of our Commandos, were also employed for the hill fighting. There was a build-up of further American Divisions, including Thirty-Fourth, veterans of Tunisia and Sicily, and Third.

The Allied troops began to go ashore about four o'clock in

\* He subsequently returned to active service at the beginning of August, 1944, to command a Corps with brilliant distinction in the last phase in Normandy. He was in charge of the sweeping blitz advance upon Brussels and Antwerp.

the morning of Thursday, September 9. Almost immediately they ran into fierce artillery fire from the German batteries in the hills. In several places, on both the British and American fronts, they were counter-attacked on the beaches by German tank formations. Nevertheless, during that first day, they made good their landings on a wide front, and positions were seized on the Thursday and the Friday, which proved of vital importance when the full weight of the German counter-attacks began to be felt in the course of the week-end.

There were three main disadvantages with which General Clark had to cope. The first was the preparedness of the German troops. Had the landings been made a few days earlier, we should have found only Italian forces in the neighbourhood and could have speedily established ourselves and gone forward. Those few days of delay came near to being the undoing of the whole operation.

Secondly, the configuration of the country gave the defenders a rim of steep hills looking directly down on to the landing beaches. From above Salerno, from above Paestum, every movement of troops in the coastal plain can be observed with the utmost clarity. In that respect our choice of landing sites was God's gift to gunners.

Thirdly, the very nature of our landing operation gave the enemy tanks, at long last, an opportunity of coming into their own. Infantry, just disembarked on beaches, without tank or anti-tank gun support and lacking elbow room for manoeuvre and any but the most hastily-improvised earthworks, are just the sort of prey that a tank gunner dreams about.

And so it was in many respects a remarkable achievement that the troops established themselves on shore and at many points won positions in the hills during the first forty-eight hours which prevented the Germans obtaining the complete observation and complete domination of the beaches which would have otherwise spelled disaster for us.

Besides the protection afforded by our long-range fighters, carrying extra petrol tanks, the work of the Royal Navy in providing artillery support with its heavy guns was invaluable. The Germans attribute a great deal of their failure to throw the Fifth Army back into the sea to the effectiveness of this heavy artillery support, with which they had no adequate means of dealing.

But during the week-end things looked very grim indeed. The Germans, constantly bringing up reinforcements, threw in counter-attack after counter-attack, particularly in the area of the Sele river in an attempt to cut the Allied landing forces in two. On one occasion their tanks got within about four hundred yards of the shore, but their Intelligence appeared to be at fault, for this thrust was not followed up. It is difficult for anyone who, like myself, was not present in the beach-head during those critical days to estimate how nearly we came to being driven into the sea. When a party of us arrived from Eighth Army on the following Wednesday we were equally surprised at the gloomy state of mind that characterised many Americans and British that day, and the evidences of considerable forces on our side that clearly had not yet been thrown into action. I was astonished to see the number of American tanks drawn up in serried ranks in front of the temple of Pæstum which had clearly not as yet been committed. I had scarcely expected to find that the rim of hills above Pæstum was securely in American hands and that I could sleep in perfect safety on the very summit, as I did that night. And all through that afternoon I heard the constant hum of our planes overhead.

Yet it was impossible to get from the American sector to the British by the main road; one still had to turn off and take a track that ran close to the sea. And during that day I heard the phrase "Beleaguered garrison" rather freely used.

Certainly the Germans quite genuinely believed that they were on the verge of compelling another Dunkirk. Sertorius, a restrained and objective commentator, on the Tuesday evening had described the American troops as "demoralised," and indicated that re-embarkation had that day begun, on a large scale. And German radio and press echoed the same views. I don't think they ever hoped to round up the Fifth Army, but they did for some days expect to drive it into the sea. It would have been Dunkirk, not Tunisia.

It was a critical time. Fifth Army was fighting with its back to the sea and little room for manœuvre while Eighth Army moving up from the south seemed far too distant to be in a position to affect the issue.

## XI. The Junction of the Armies

WHEN the Eighth Army reached Nicastro on Friday, September 10, just a week after the landing at Reggio, it had completed the task originally assigned to it. It was in firm control of the butt end of the Calabrian peninsula, and it was in possession of an adequate forward air field at Vibo Valentia. There had been scarcely any fighting at all, and it was clear that the Germans had not intended to defend southern Calabria. Montgomery's men had finished their task, and any further advance would put a considerable strain upon their long line of communications from Reggio.

But the situation at Salerno was grave. Over the week-end it appeared to be becoming critical. We knew that the original landing, particularly that of Forty-Six Division, who were on the left flank at Salerno itself, had been opposed by German tanks on the beaches. The landing had been made early on the morning of Thursday, September 9. By Saturday it was regarded at Eighth Army Headquarters as touch and go whether the Anglo-American forces in the new bridgehead would be able to hold on, or whether they would be driven into the sea by the German armoured counter-attacks supported by larger concentrations of enemy air strength than we had seen in the Mediterranean for many months.

On Sunday morning the news had seemed rather better, and the Americans appeared to be getting more elbow-room inland from Pæstum towards the hills. But on Monday things seemed to have worsened once more, as the Germans were making attack after attack in their effort to break through to the beaches.

And so General Alexander, having visited the beach-head, instructed Montgomery to push on from Nicastro as far on and as fast as possible with a view to relieving the pressure on Fifth Army and making an early junction with its southern flank. I believe that in the original estimate, made in August, three weeks had been regarded as the period likely to elapse



between the date of the landing at Reggio and the junction of the Armies. Now, the urgency of the situation at Salerno imposed a speeding-up of the original time-table.

I don't know when the idea occurred to us—the idea that we might go buccaneering ahead of the army once more to see what we could find in the vast No Man's Land, nearly one hundred and fifty miles in breadth that had come into being between Nicastro and the new bridgehead as a result of the surrender of Italy and the capitulation of her armies. Certainly the idea occurred neither very early nor in any very clear-cut form. Nor do we seem at the start to have had any particular sense of urgency about the expedition. On the morning of Monday, September 13, I sat on the flat roof of the villa near Nicastro where we had temporarily billeted ourselves. In the pleasant autumn sunshine I read "War and Peace," wondering why the Hollywood magnates had not got hold of it. (Or have they?) I wrote several letters. I devoured large quantities of the strawberry-flavoured grapes of the neighbourhood. I chatted with Joe, an Americanised ex-Chicago gangster of Italian birth who was now acting as caretaker of the villa and who specialised in the "Hello, boy, speak English and hand-shake" approach. It has not been my fortune to meet many gangsters, and I should have liked to have seen more of Joe. But—*Dis aliter Visum*. Joe remained an only partially digested experience and we drove off (Monson, Deluce, Munro and myself), rather reluctantly in my case northward along the coast, into the blue.

We covered ninety dusty miles that afternoon and stopped for the night at Diamanti, where we were approaching the northern boundary of Calabria. At 6.30 on Tuesday morning, while the full moon was still high up in the tranquil autumnal sky, we renewed our journey. In pale dawn we reached Scalea, some fifteen miles farther on. Here we found the extreme advance-guard of Eighth Army—a small reconnaissance patrol of armoured cars. The young lieutenant who was in command told us that, although his own troop was the most forward body in the army, a mobile patrol had been forward on the coastal road as far as Maretea, some twenty miles farther on. We breakfasted at Scalea and discussed our next move. I wasn't

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at all keen about going on beyond Maratea. I was feeling particularly timid that morning, and I had a wholesome respect for mines after our experience the previous week at Pizzo : moreover, I was inclined to feel that the whole expedition was in the nature of a wild goose chase, not to mention a fool's errand.

Perhaps we should have gone no further than Maratea but for the merest accident. Another party of War Correspondent, had, though we didn't yet know it, preceded us. On a house wall in Maratea we saw painted in large blue letters "P.R." followed by an arrow pointing northwards.

P.R. stood for Public Relations, the quaint name by which our unit was known. (During the scare period of the summer of 1940, when Public Relations officers had occasion to ring up other branches of G.H.Q., they were not infrequently greeted with some such rebuff as "Never heard of Public Relations ! Sounds Fifth Column to me !") That decided us. If others had gone ahead, then we would, too. I stifled my own misgivings about German minefields, wild goose chases and fools' errands, and we all agreed to drive on in the Archæological. An hour or two later Alan Moorehead and Alex. Clifford arrived at the same point in their Army Film Unit truck. They saw the notice, but although they were two of the veteran correspondents of the war who had grown grey, metaphorically speaking, under the eye of P.R. they mistook the initials for Panzer Regiment. Nevertheless they decided to go on and follow on the heels of the retreating Panzers, which is a great deal more than I should have felt inclined to do.

Through the villages beyond Maratea we sped. Everywhere we received the same enthusiastic welcome with which we had grown so familiar during the past few days. It was flowers and fruit and eggs (fresh ones in baskets) wherever we stopped, until our car began to resemble the inside of a church at Harvest Festival. We really only needed a giant pumpkin to render the illusion complete. It was in reference to incidents like this that Beachcomber had occasion to record in his column the protest of Captain Foulénough, who complained indignantly that he was the only war correspondent who had not been "literally smothered" with flowers. And certain readers at home must

have grown very bored with reading these repeated accounts of the literal smothering of war correspondents. I can only say that it really did happen—in a manner of speaking.

We reached Policastro where the main road crosses a river and turns inland through the hills of Campania. The bridge across the river had been very thoroughly destroyed by the retreating Germans and the banks at this point were steep, but a small cohort of enthusiastic little boys guided us round to a ford some distance away. The river had split into several branches at this phase, and our guides stationed themselves at various points knee-deep in the water to indicate the best route across. Fortunately the bed of the river was composed of firm gravel, and we had little difficulty in getting through. To lighten the weight on the Archæological, which carried all our kit, we got out and waded across in advance of it. Our infant St. Christophers told us that they had guided another English car across the river about an hour earlier. That must be our colleagues who had so obligingly painted up the notice in Maratea, without which we probably would not have proceeded any further.

There seemed to be a theory that the main road beyond the river had been mined, and so we turned off to the left and followed a series of side roads that wound deviously through the hills in the general direction of Agropoli near which place we hoped that we might contact the right flank of the Fifth Army. I suppose that, by this time, we were definitely clear in our minds that we intended to make contact with the forces at the beach-head, but I really don't remember. Anyhow, our method now was to drive on from village to village, stopping at each to inquire whether there were any Germans in the neighbourhood. We were now in an area where it was very probable that we might at any time run into a German patrol. But at each village the answer was reassuring. A patrol of German armoured cars, and perhaps an occasional tank had passed through one, two, or three days earlier, but the villagers had seen no Germans since, and they believed that the road to the next village was clear. And in each place we learned that "another English car" had passed through an hour or two hours earlier.

We were passing through the village of Bulgheria when the driver pulled up the Archæological with a sharp grinding of the brakes, and all our heads craned out of the car simultaneously in the same direction. We had just caught sight of the most beautiful girl I had ever seen in my life. It was pure Zuleika Dobson stuff. By common consent we all emerged from the car. I thought Monson's eyes were going to pop out of his head. The encounter nearly proved fatal to the prosecution of our resolve. We felt sorely tempted to stop in Bulgheria and cultivate the young lady's acquaintance. Monson looked at Deluce; Munro looked at me. But the Stern Voice of Duty jerked at our conscience strings, and reluctantly we realised that we must drive on. But we continued to babble about the young lady to one another, and we were still babbling when, cresting a wooded ridge, we came upon the occupants of "the other English car" sitting peacefully consuming a picnic lunch among the oak trees by the roadside.

This party consisted of Evelyn Montague of the *Manchester Guardian*, Ted Gilling of *Exchange Telegraph* and Eric Lloyd-Williams of Reuters. With them, and leading their party, was Captain John Soboleff of Public Relations.

Even at the risk of interrupting the thread of this narrative, such as it is, I cannot refrain from a brief digression upon John Soboleff. I think he must be one of the most colourful and picturesque figures in the British Army. A pure-blooded Russian, he was born at Omsk in central Siberia. ("Well, there *is* a place called Omsk, and so some people must be born there. I was!" he once retorted to an incredulous little official who had never heard of Omsk and didn't believe that there was such a place.) As a very young man he had fought in the Russian Imperial Army during the First World War. He had fought under Kolchak during the Civil Wars. Followed a period of several years during which he had disappeared into China, emerging with considerably widened military experience and a fearsome-looking Chinese decoration striped like a tiger skin. Next he popped up in the United States as the guest of William Randolph Hearst. A little more globe-trotting, and he re-appeared to study medicine at the University of Gottingen. Finally he settled down as a throat and ear specialist in London.

When the war came he joined the Rifle Brigade, served in Libya, won the M.C. at Knightsbridge, was wounded and invalided out of the army but turned up once more in the Public Relations unit.

John was amazingly good company. He had all the soldier of fortune's ability to live off the countryside. Napoleon used to emphasise to his Marshals the necessity of "making war support war," and certainly in John Soboleff he would have found a most enthusiastic and able exponent of his doctrine. John never looted, but somehow the good things of the countryside had a habit of coming his way. In Sicily he and Monson had bought up all the French champagne that remained in Syracuse, and as he progressed up Italy sheep and chickens, fruit and wine seemed drawn to him by some form of magnetic attraction. John had a *flair* for knowing where the fruits of life were to be found. To some extent his success was due to the gusto and zest with which he bargained. He had many of the characteristics of a high-spirited schoolboy of sixteen. He dearly loved to swap anything for anything else. He was always buying watches and exchanging them for other watches; he never had less than three or four in his possession. In Sicily he "acquired" a trailer for his jeep under circumstances which, as the war is not yet over, I had better not reveal.

I make no apology for this digression upon John Soboleff. He is something larger than Life; he is Literature. He is among the immortals. In some far-off paradise he will be with Falstaff and Squire Western and Alfred Jingle and Wilkins Micawber. And he will be selling them watches and Italian revolvers.

We joined John's party, and sat down among the trees to share their Arcadian banquet among the oak trees. My ridiculous mental habit of likening any unusual situation in which I find myself to some scene in Shakespeare began to assert itself, and I was just reflecting how much our party resembled the outlaws feasting *alfresco* in the Forest of Arden when we were interrupted by the entry of Orlando, in the persons of Clifford and Moorehead, who appeared in their vast truck, hungrily demanding food and drink.

\* We were now quite a formidable party—two officers and

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nine Correspondents—and we held a council of war to decide upon our next move. Comparing notes we came to the conclusion that the Germans had evacuated all the villages in the neighbourhood of the side roads by which we had journeyed, and that they would not return to them. In one village a German armoured car was reported to have turned its machine-gun upon the crowd gathered in the street. It was not the first time that incidents of this nature had occurred between the Germans and the Italians. We had been following a route roughly midway between the main road to Salerno and Naples, which lay on our right, and the sea on our left, and it seemed fairly clear that the German rearguards were turning inland from the mountain villages towards the highroad, as if fearing the possibility of being caught by the right flank of the Americans in the Pæstum-Agropoli area. If that surmise proved correct, it meant that they were making no further attempt to interpose a force between the Eighth and the Fifth Armies and there was a good prospect of a clear road through to the Americans.

We knew that we now lay close upon the flank of the German retreat. We were only three or four miles from the main road along which the rearguard of German armoured cars would be passing on their way to join the main body of their army further north opposite the Salerno bridgehead. By this time they might have all passed by. On the other hand they might not. And as we had nothing more than a couple of rifles and two or three revolvers in our party (unless John Soboleff concealed a complete armoury about his person, which was quite possible) we were likely to come off worst in any chance encounter with even a single armoured car.

Monson drove ahead to reconnoitre. Within a quarter of an hour he was back with a report of a vehicle, which he believed to be a German armoured car, which was coming *south*, i.e. in our direction, along the highroad.

We felt a lot less brave than we had done five minutes earlier. Should the armoured car, if it was an armoured car, turn off up into the oak forest it wouldn't be too good for us. We hastily packed the cars and stood by. From our position on the crest of the ridge we could get a fairly good view forward,

though it was somewhat broken by the trees. We kept a sharp look-out for some time, but nothing appeared. Eventually John Soboleff, Lloyd-Williams, Gilling and myself drove forward to have another look. We struck the main road. There seemed no indications of the presence of any enemy units. We turned north along the road. We arrived at the town of Vallo. We drove up to the headquarters of the Carabinieri and received the formal surrender of the town. As usual, the Chief of Carabinieri would, one felt, have liked a little more pomp and ceremonial about the surrender. We looked so dusty and dishevelled. But he was a good-natured individual, and he chuckled heartily over the fact that the War Correspondents were so much in advance of the vanguard of the army.

He told us that four German armoured cars had passed rapidly through the town early that morning in the direction of the neighbouring town of Stio, fifteen kilometres to the north. That appeared to be the only hostile force in the neighbourhood.

Presently the rest of our party arrived in Vallo. It was now six o'clock in the evening and nearing sunset. A long debate developed among us. We all had different views about where we should spend the night, and we all kept changing our minds. The Chief of Carabinieri was full of ideas.

"I will telephone to Stio," he said, "and find out if the Germans are still there."

And telephone he did. That it was possible to telephone from one side of the lines to the other and simply inquire where the enemy were added yet another touch of the sheer fantasy to this singular journey between the armies. It was pure Lewis Carroll; it might have occurred in "Alice in Wonderland." One could so well imagine the White Knight telephoning to his opposite number to find out his precise position before beginning the battle. I began to feel that I had wandered right out of the rational world. Things like that just didn't happen in modern war.

The Chief of Carabinieri returned. He had telephoned to Stio and had learnt that the four German armoured cars had not withdrawn any further. They were patrolling the town, and they might take into their heads to patrol back in the direction

in which they had come. Our soft-skinned vehicles and rifles offered no adequate protection against them if they came. It was better to pull some little distance out of the town for the night. I had become deeply involved in an argument with one of the Carabinieri about the merits of Italy's Abyssinian campaign, and I had just reached the stage where I was hoping to bring him to see the light. But it wasn't sensible to stay, particularly as the Chief of Carabinieri was beginning to display obvious signs of embarrassment at the prospect of being caught by the Germans fraternising with a party of British. I can't blame him, for in the present situation of Italy—it was only six days since the announcement of the armistice—every small town official had perforce to develop the characteristics of the Vicar of Bray. It might be "here to-day and gone to-morrow" with the British as well as with the Germans.

Just as I had been rather timid at the opening of the day, so now I was correspondingly anxious to spend the night in Vallo and chance the return of the Germans. I had a hunch that they wouldn't come back. There is no logic about these things, so far as I can see; I had started the day in an over-cautious mood, I was now correspondingly over-confident. As it happened, the Germans didn't return to Vallo, but it would have been rather silly to have run a needless risk by staying there.

Eventually we decided that, as we had to pull out of the town, we would go forward rather than back, but would turn off the main road again. We drove on to a small château which John Soboleff knew of at Castelnuovo, about ten miles farther on. God only knows how John was aware of its existence, but he was; and he appeared to know the owner as well. Perhaps he had been that way in one of the earlier and unrecorded phases of his career. We drove our cars into the garden in the darkness, unpacked our camp-beds, and then the eleven of us filed upstairs to a long, low-ceilinged room on the first floor, where we found a meal awaiting us. It was an awfully good meal, too. We had had so many meals in such queer places, mostly in the open air, for so many weeks, that to sit down at a long, polished table seemed a novel experience, and we all, I think, unconsciously adopted dinner-party manners. I sat next to Alex. Clifford,



whom I have known for years, and we discussed exactly the subjects that you might expect dinner-party guests to discuss. It was all pleasantly unusual, and I am sure that we all completely forgot that we were slap in the middle of no man's land.

Before we went to bed we had one of those friendly but silly arguments that occur on such occasions. Evelyn Montague said that as his party had led the way and blazed the trail they proposed to continue to keep at the head of the *cortège*. Therefore they were going to get up at six o'clock on the following morning so as to get an early start; we could do as we liked. I pointed out that we should all undoubtedly cling together now, and if he got up at six o'clock we should certainly do so, too. So why not all be comfortable and lie in bed a bit longer? Bit there was no dissuading him, and so we all rose next morning in the grey dawn. I didn't really mind.

It was the morning of Wednesday, September 15. Our three cars moved forward over the last phase of our journey through the rambling hills and villages of the Campanian coast. We were now in country where one of the greatest hide-and-seeks of history had taken place. Nearly twenty-one centuries ago Hannibal had sought and Fabius had avoided battle month after month among these very ridges and valleys. We had no difficulty in picking up local guides on the way. They knew that the American forces were in the neighbourhood, and they undertook to bring us to them.

But they had reckoned without the blown bridges and cratered roads. With the utmost good will in the world they succeeded in leading us from one cul-de-sac to another. We reckoned that we could not be as much as fifteen miles distant, by this time, from the nearest American outpost. But we couldn't see how we were to cover that last fifteen miles in our cars if all the roads were blown. We reached a chasm where the bridge that carried the road over to the farther side had, of course, been destroyed. But this time there was a difference. On the fringe of the chasm we saw a number of empty American ration boxes, the oblong cardboard packages containing K rations (biscuits, cheese, coffee, sugar and a stick of chocolate). That told us that the Americans had been on this actual spot, had demolished this actual bridge. We were no longer therefore in no man's

land; we were on the verge of the territory controlled by the Fifth Army. But an impassable chasm divided us.

It was exasperating. We were now all of us thoroughly bitten with the determination to make contact with the Fifth Army. But how the devil were we going to do it? We thought of bicycles. We could leave one or more of our party in charge of the cars and carry the bicycles across to the farther side of the demolition. The idea of turning up among the Fifth Army on bicycles rather appealed to me. I like arriving in unexpected places by unexpected means of transport. The previous year Dick Macmillan and I had walked on foot into the Knightsbridge "box" during the height of the battle there, and had got a kick out of the fact that the approach to it was under such heavy shell-fire that no officer would let a car pass along the track.

So Clifford and I walked back a mile to the village of Pollica to see what we could do about commandeering bicycles. We weren't very successful. Clifford got one officially assigned to him by the Carabinieri and I, feeling rather a bully, appropriated one from a villager. Having previously urged in print the value of cyclists as an advanced skirmishing screen to be flung ahead of road demolitions, I felt it incumbent on myself to put precept into practice. But two bicycles weren't much use to a party of eleven, and it was obviously going to be slow and tedious work covering fifteen hilly miles, only to return the same day to our stranded cars. After we had cycled forward to the chasm again we found that our enthusiasm for this form of exercise was already rapidly dwindling. Our companions, moreover, had acquired during our absence a new guide who reported that there was a clear road through to the north. It seemed to be the line of least resistance, so, having made arrangements for the bicycles to be returned to their owners, we gulped down some breakfast (soya bean-sausage and tepid tea) and started off once more.

Our progress now partook of the nature of a paper-chase, as we were all keeping our eyes open for further traces of Americans having passed or lingered in the neighbourhood. They had been at the bridge over our chasm at about six o'clock the previous evening when we were in Vallo only a few miles distant.

It was ten minutes to eleven that morning when we met them. Just beyond the village of Castagneto we saw ahead of us an American half-tracked vehicle proceeding slowly up the road in front of us, carrying a crew charged with mine-laying and bridge demolition. At first they appeared to think that we were a vanguard of some hostile force, and they covered us with a tommy-gun. Then they saw that we were British. We drove up to them. Handshakes and congratulations were exchanged, and we were able to assure this outpost of the hard-pressed Fifth Army, which had been fighting so desperately for its landing beaches, that their southern flank was open and disengaged and that behind us were the advancing forces of the Eighth Army.

They had been on the point of demolishing yet another bridge, but we were able to dissuade them from this, since it would no longer form any obstacle to the Germans, for there were no Germans in the whole area. We had come through it and we knew. Then we drove on towards the main body, passing several other groups of American sappers. We came out into the coastal plain, and suddenly saw the lovely classical temple of Paestum, as beautifully preserved from the ravages of time as the Theseum at Athens, to which it bears a certain resemblance. A few hundred yards farther on and we reached Fifth Army headquarters.

The next few hours were rather a whirl. We wanted to settle down and write our accounts of the journey as speedily as possible. But first of all we had to have our photographs taken. Then General Alexander sent for us, and asked for a detailed account of the condition of the roads in the area which we had traversed. It was all very gratifying, but we were feeling rather tired and when we began to look back upon it it was difficult to see anything particularly remarkable on our exploit. We had come through a hundred and twenty miles of no man's land from one Army to another, but anyone else could have done it, and the episode strengthened my previous conviction that a quite unnecessary slackness had been allowed to develop in the British forces in this matter of following up and maintaining contact with a retreating enemy. There was too much inclination to accept demolitions as an Act of God. The sappers

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worked as hard and as fast as they could at them, but our command seemed to take it for granted that there were no means of circumventing them.

I repeat that what we had done others could have done. An armed patrol from the Eighth Army setting out when we did, and not halting for the various frivolous reasons which had caused us to halt in the course of our journey, might have made contact with Fifth Army several hours earlier. General Alexander and General Clark would have received the news that there were no German forces remaining between the two armies, the unnecessary demolition of several bridges would have been avoided and the commanders at the beach-head might well have felt in a position to go over to the offensive rather earlier than they did. At the very least, the considerable tension prevailing at the beach-head could have been relieved.

A British officer of my acquaintance was at pains to point out to us that our expedition had not the least military significance. Frankly, I think he was wrong. It was not in the least dangerous, but it was militarily significant. It was significant that it should be possible for technical non-combatants to get so far in advance of an army in the direction of the goal towards which that army is hastening. The lesson is a tactical one, and it requires a tactical solution. More than ever it underlined the fact that our armies were becoming too road-bound, that not enough attention was being paid to the employment of light pursuit and reconnaissance forces.

That day, Wednesday, September 15, was the turning point on the Salerno front. It was the last day on which the situation appeared critical. And without any doubt it was the Allied Air Forces under the control of Air Chief Marshal Tedder which saved the situation. The keypoint was the little town of Battipaglia, where the inland road from Potenza cuts the coastal road from Calabria to Salerno at right-angles. Battipaglia itself had been taken by the Allies, but subsequently lost. As long as the Germans could hold on to it it formed a natural point of concentration for a counter-attack which might force its way through to the coast and cut the Salerno forces in two, dividing the British in the north from the Americans in the south. During

September 13 and September 14 the entire strategical and tactical Air Forces under Tedder's command were turned on to the German positions opposite the beach-head. Again and again enemy concentrations preparing to go forward to the attack were broken up by bombing from the air. Battipaglia was reduced to a mere shell of gutted houses in the process, but the essential job was done. The bombers broke up the troop concentrations and then the fighter-bombers swept down and raked the German infantry with machine-gun fire. In the course of Tuesday two thousand sorties were made by Allied aircraft over the beach-head, and during Wednesday it began to be clear that the Germans could no longer maintain their effort. They began to pull back from the area between the Sele and the Calore rivers. American troops of the Thirty-Sixth (Texan) Division held the razor-crested ridge of Vecchio Carpacchio which looks down on the one side on the coast around Pæstum, on the other side upon the German positions in the plain of Campania. (I spent that Wednesday night on the very crest of the ridge in the moonlight. Too tired to sleep, I talked long and late with a couple of pleasant American lads from Texas. I have often wondered what happened to them afterwards. I expect they both died on the Rapido next January. Most of Thirty-Sixth Division did.)

Early next morning the Americans took Albanella in the plain beyond the hills, and the whole line prepared to move slowly forward. The crisis was past.

## XII. The Tide in the Affairs of Men

WHILE the critical battle was being fought at Salerno events were developing fast in other parts of Italy, events which were to shape the whole course and pattern of the winter campaigns in south-eastern Europe.

Whether the suddenness of the Italian surrender at the beginning of September took both the Allies and the Germans equally by surprise I have no means of judging. But it was

painfully and tragically apparent which combatant reacted the more swiftly and with the greater vigour and decision. There can be no doubt now that September, 1943, was one of the crucial months of the entire war. Italy collapsed, and a great void was left in southern and south-eastern Europe. Not only in the peninsula itself, but all over the Balkans and in the islands of the Aegean the defection of Italy from the ranks of the belligerents left immense opportunities to whichever side should be quickest to seize them. It was a race for positions. The Germans should have been at a disadvantage in this respect, but it was the Germans who almost everywhere seized the initiative and took over with their own garrisons the regions formerly controlled by Italian troops.

It was a great opportunity missed. One cannot know all the circumstances which resulted in the bright promise of the spring and summer being dissipated in the winter shambles around Ortona and Cassino. What is abundantly clear is that when the hour of opportunity struck, the British and Americans did not possess the necessary forces with which to exploit it. The "tide in the affairs of men" was upon them, but they failed to take it at the flood.

To examine further into this matter is to probe mysteries that are still Eleusinian. No doubt the decisions taken at the Quebec Conference in August inhibited an adequate supply of troops and shipping for the follow-up in southern Europe. A "Second Front" in western Europe having been decided upon in principle, for 1944, no doubt it was necessary to begin the "build-up" as early as the autumn of 1943. No doubt the pressure of his Allies forced Mr. Churchill, whom no one can accuse of having been unaware of the strategic possibilities of the Mediterranean, to compromise, to whittle away the original grand conception of Mediterranean victory. I think one may make a pretty good guess that Mr. Churchill, left to himself, would have followed up our initial successes of the spring and summer with every man, ship and gun that was available.

Whatever may be the subsequent verdict of history, it is quite clear that in September, 1943, the Allies were guilty of a grave strategic error. In the face of a reeling enemy they "pulled their punch." There may be a political justification for such

an action; there is no military justification. One could take countless parallels from history. One could instance Hannibal's failure to follow up his victory fo Cannæ (which is near Foggia) with a rapid sweep upon Rome, siege-engines or no siege-engines. One might draw attention to the political pressure which prevented Marlborough from inflicting the *coup de grâce* upon Louis XIV after his victories in the Netherlands. The modification and ultimate whittling down of the Schlieffen Plan by the German General Staff in the years preceding 1914 was perhaps more responsible than any other one factor for the defeat of the Central Powers in the first World War. In our own day we have seen the consequences of Hitler's failure to carry his war with Britain to a conclusion before turning to attack Russia.

The lesson is unmistakable. We made a grave error in our broad strategic plan in the autumn of 1943. We have paid a heavy price for it since that date.

Few aspects of the war have been more remarkable than the manner in which in those crucial September days Germany, abandoned by her principal European ally and staggering under a series of sledgehammer blows on the Russian front, managed to act with such vigour and decision in the south of Europe.

The first thing to be done was to seize Rome, the nerve centre of the whole kingdom, and obtain control over central and northern Italy, at the same time disarming the Italian garrisons in these areas. The German command wasted no time. Wednesday, September 8, had brought to the Italian people the news of the armistice. There was a good deal of public rejoicing in the streets of Rome and other cities, but no organised demonstration, for no one quite knew what would be the next development and the citizens of the capital, tensely alert, waited for an *éclaircissement* of the situation. It was not long in coming.

Next morning a column of damaged armoured cars and lorries limped slowly down the great Via Flaminia, which enters the city from the north. They had been in action against the Germans at Monte Rotondo, ten miles north of Rome. The officer in charge of the column told the bystanders that the Germans had opened fire on the Italian troops. He said that

the attack had been resisted and that the Italians had driven off the assailants. But at noon came more definite and much more disquieting news. It was learned that the King and Marshal Badoglio had fled from Rome, without leaving any instructions regarding the defence of the capital. The captain and the first mate had simply abandoned the ship and scuttled away to the protection of the British and American guns. It was probably necessary that the Italian *de jure* Government should keep itself well out of the way of the German clutches, but the method of doing so was inglorious and was scarcely calculated to stimulate the fighting morale of the garrison or citizens of Rome.

Nevertheless, deprived of their king and all members of their Government, with the exception of a single Minister (Piccardi), the population of Rome made strenuous efforts to improvise a resistance. There was an almost total absence of organisation from above, but isolated groups of soldiers and civilians gathered to defend their city. Rome did not fall altogether without a struggle.

Under the sponsorship of Prince Doria the Associazione Nazionale Combattenti began to supervise these defence measures, supported by a small group of former officials and members of Parliament. Among those honourably distinguished in advocating resistance was eighty-year-old Marshal Caviglia, a hero of the last war, who had commanded an army with distinction on the Piave. Caviglia explained that he had no official status and no personal authority, but he urged that Rome should be true to its history and its traditions and defend itself by a *levée en masse* along the lines of the defence of Warsaw. The staff of the Italian Corps stationed at Rome endorsed this advice. The population was to be armed and, as a first instalment, six hundred rifles were distributed among civilian volunteers. For the moment it looked as though the brave days of Madrid in 1936 might be repeated in the Italian capital against a still more formidable foe.

But time was too short, tragically too short for a bewildered populace who might otherwise have defended their homes against an "ally" who had come to be an object of common loathing. That evening—it was Thursday, September 9, and



the Anglo-American forces were just established on shore at Salerno—the Italian troops were falling back from Monte Rotondo, falling back across the field of Mentana, where Garibaldi himself had suffered defeat three-quarters of a century earlier in a heroically impulsive attempt to seize Rome for the new Italian kingdom. A detachment of Italian granadiers had been overrun and massacred by the Germans. Elsewhere officers of the Carabinieri were heard announcing that they had received orders (it was not clear from whom) not to resist the Germans.

And so the loyal troops were being driven back, the Carabinieri were hesitant and uncertain in their allegiance, but the population, it seemed, would fight against the barbarians and, once again in the noble language of her great liberators, *Italia fara da se*.

There was little sleep in Rome that night. Throughout the hours of darkness the citizens could hear the sound of heavy gunfire, the shell-bursts drawing ever closer towards the city, and as dawn began to break the quick rattle of machine-gun and rifle took their place, which told that the barbarian was now in the outskirts. The net was tightening around Rome, for the German troops were approaching both from north to south. There was bad news, too, of the behaviour of the Blackshirt Militia, who were deserting bodily to the Germans and joining forces with them against their own countrymen. This Militia had been abolished as a separate organisation by Badoglio, but had been incorporated in the regular army, retaining its officers and its equipment. Now it was behaving after its kind.

By this time all was confusion in Rome. Civilians were running about the streets inquiring where they could obtain arms and where they should post themselves so as to oppose the enemy. But no one knew the answers. In the course of the morning posters began to appear in the streets announcing that Marshal Caviglia, on his own initiative, had taken command as senior officer remaining in the city. But the posters also announced that he had made contact with the German High Command with a view to arranging a truce.

Rumour and counter-rumour pursued one another along the crowded streets, and always the sound of gunfire was coming nearer and nearer from north and south. At twelve-thirty the

air-raid alarms sounded, but no planes appeared overhead, and it was generally believed that they had been sounded largely in order to put the population in a state of emergency. But the all clear did not sound until four o'clock.

At one o'clock it was announced on the radio that negotiations between Marshal Caviglia and the German Command had been broken off, but no further announcement followed to elucidate the statement. By this time Italian troops were hurrying into the city on foot from the southern approaches towards the Piazza Venezia. They brought the news that the Germans had broken through and would be in the heart of the city at any time. A few officers with more initiative than their fellows endeavoured to organise some kind of street resistance. A number of armoured cars and troops were beginning to assemble in the Piazza Venezia and in the Corso Umberto. Elsewhere soldiers and civilians were forming in groups of a dozen or twenty, but without leadership and without any certain information. The Associazione Nazionale was engaged in telephoning to one Ministry after another, but from all they could discover it appeared that these buildings, not excluding the War Ministry, had been left in charge of the telephonists. It was terribly reminiscent of the October Revolution in Petrograd in 1917, when Kerensky had bolted and the Government offices had been abandoned to the defence of women and boy cadets.

At three o'clock the radio announced that a truce between the German and Italian command had been signed, though Marshal Caviglia's name was not mentioned and no one knew who was taking responsibility for the Italian surrender. By the terms of the truce the German troops were to remain in the outskirts of Rome and only to occupy the German Embassy, the wireless station and the telephone exchange in the city itself. Count Calvi di Bergolo, a son-in-law of the King and a noted equestrian performer who had made frequent appearances at Olympia and elsewhere in England in peace-time, was announced to have taken over command in the "open city of Rome."

The truce was honoured just as might have been expected in view of the German record in these affairs. Next morning, September 10, the German troops were all over the town. The

Italian soldiers were simply disarmed and ordered to wear white armbands inscribed with the word "Polizia." A futile protest by Calvi di Bergolo to the effect that he possessed all the troops necessary to maintain order in the town in addition to the Carabinieri was calmly ignored by the Germans.

All civilians were instructed to give up their arms immediately. Nevertheless, during the Friday and Saturday spasmodic sniping against the German troops passing through the city continued. Apparently this was, for the most part, the work of civilians. Accordingly, it was announced by the German Command that all who promoted disorder, whether by sniping or by encouraging strikes or any kind of disturbances, would be promptly shot. A little later in a radio address the Italian people were invited to join the Germans against the British and "the traitor Badoglio." Numbers of Blackshirts and a few Italian soldiers paraded about Rome carrying the swastika flag and an enormous photograph of Mussolini.

In the next few days the Germans finally cleaned up all remaining vestiges of resistance in Rome. They disarmed any troops who had not joined the Germans. They confiscated all military vehicles. Private cars were requisitioned, houses were looted and civilians frequently held up in the streets and forced to give up all their possessions even down to the small change in their pockets.

Of course, there was never any prospect that the defence could have succeeded against the preponderance of German military strength (although the Italian troops immediately available far outnumbered the Germans), and above all against German military prestige. But the defence might have been valuably prolonged. For example, an officer of the Ariete Division, stationed at Tivoli, near Rome, stated afterwards that the Division had both the intention and the ability to defend itself, but they received continuously contradictory orders until finally the officers began to put on civilian clothes and desert, whereupon the entire Division capitulated with all its equipment without fighting at all.

That was Rome, and the picture for the rest of Italy was no more encouraging. The big towns of northern Italy were just as impotent to stem the German counter-measures as Rome

had been. In very few regions did the Germans have to fight at all. It was not always the case that the Italians had not the will to resist, but rather that, as in Rome, they lacked both the organisation and the leadership which would have provided the means of fighting effectively. There have sometimes been indications that our High Command hoped for a rather more prolonged urban and guerrilla resistance. They were not justified in this hope, for it was unreasonable to expect that a people who had seen the cream of their manpower skimmed to die in remote, meaningless battles overseas or to languish in enemy prison camps would have very much stomach for tackling so formidable an opponent as the German with his blood up and imbued with a spirit of ruthless desperation.

And so resistance in the north quickly fizzled out. Venice surrendered without a shot being fired, Florence allowed itself to be dominated by a few well-sited machine-gun posts. Elsewhere parties of five or ten German soldiers proved sufficient to overawe entire towns. Once again the Germans conquered by the sheer weight of their military prestige. The most prolonged resistance seems to have come from the cities of Milan and Cremona. In both places there was plenty of individual, spontaneous courage; in neither were there the means of canalising it effectively. In both towns the Blackshirts, in contrast with their attitude in the capital, made common cause with their fellow-countrymen. Here at any rate blood proved thicker than the Party membership card. But the Germans had two Divisions available for the cleaning up of this area, and they possessed tanks and more modern weapons than the Italians. In street fighting nowadays civilians and partially-armed soldiers, fighting with the technique and often the weapons of 1848, are helpless. After two or three days the Germans succeeded in overrunning the improvised defences of both towns. In revenge for the losses which they suffered in the fighting outside Cremona, they forbade, under penalty of imprisonment, the burying of the Italian corpses which littered the Brescia road. This veto was maintained in force for at least ten days. But day after day the women of Cremona would walk out along the country roads and scatter flowers over the slain.

The German High Command, it must be admitted to their

credit, had a very clear idea of what they could and what they could not retain ; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say of what they judged essential to the maintenance of their position in southern Europe and what they felt could be abandoned without significantly influencing the strategic situation. Thus they made no attempt to defend Corsica and Sardinia. Indeed, at that time it appeared that their chief concern in this area was to withdraw the Ninetieth Motorised Division (heirs of the famous Ninetieth Light who had capitulated in Tunisia) to the mainland as speedily as possible to guard against the threat of an Anglo-American landing in the neighbourhood of Livorno. Sardinia was abandoned immediately (Italian troops took over control on behalf of the United Nations from September 19). There was some skirmishing in Corsica, where French troops were landed on September 20 ; but the Germans were only concerned with holding the roads along the east coast sufficiently long to enable them to evacuate their troops from Bastia, and by the end of the first week in October General Giraud's French levies were in possession of the whole island.

It does not come within the scope of this book to discuss the ill-starred expedition against the Dodecanese which was undertaken by the Middle Eastern Command. Three islands, Cos, Leros and Samos (as well as some smaller ones in the Aegean, including Syme and Santorin) were seized, as the result of an amphibious operation, during the third week of September. The occupation of these islands could only be an embarrassment to ourselves unless it were speedily followed up by a successful assault upon Rhodes. In this case it really does appear that we expected the Italian garrison to hold out against the Germans, and based our whole plan upon this assumption. But the Germans promptly disarmed and disbanded the Italian troops on the island. Then, following some heavy air attacks, which (so it appeared) our troops had scarcely expected, they landed a force on Cos, the most southerly of the islands which we had seized, and recaptured it on October 5 after two days' hard fighting.

The fall of Cos checkmated our schemes of further expansion in the Aegean, caused a profound shock to British prestige, and rendered the position of our garrisons on Leros and Samos

peculiarly precarious. In view of the fact that our offensive plan in this theatre had been so swiftly and decisively thwarted, it might have been better if we had promptly cut our losses by withdrawing from the remaining islands. But we continued to hold on to these sterile gains. The Germans, having re-established their position in the Mediterranean, seemed in no particular hurry to clinch the situation. It was not until late in November that they mounted their assault upon Leros. Having local air superiority (for our fighter bases were too far away to permit us to intervene effectively against the Luftwaffe), they succeeded, after several days of hard fighting, in reconquering the island and inflicting four thousand casualties upon us. Warned by the experience of Cos and Leros, General Wilson thereupon promptly gave orders for the evacuation of Samos, and within a few days the whole unhappy Dodecanese venture had been liquidated.

It is difficult to know as yet the extent of the opportunity which was lost when, at the time of the Italian armistice, the entire Balkan peninsular seemed to lie open to us. One may guess, but one cannot yet know, and therefore one is not justified in asserting, what influences prevented our exploitation of a position so eminently favourable to us. In Yugoslavia, in particular, a revolt against the Axis flared up on a scale as yet unprecedented during more than two years of sporadic guerrilla warfare which had followed the German conquest of the country in 1941.

At the time of the armistice in early September there was a nominal strength of some twenty Italian Divisions in Yugoslavia and Albania. This would, on paper, represent a force of not less than 160,000 men, but it is probable that, apart from casualties inflicted by the guerrillas, at least 25 per cent. of these troops had either been withdrawn to the mainland as replacements for casualties suffered there or had simply and unostentatiously deserted. Eleven of these twenty divisions were estimated to have been disarmed by the Germans, six by the partisans, while the remaining three (two of which re-christened themselves "Garibaldi" and "Matteoti" respectively) began in one manner or another to co-operate with the Yugoslav and Albanian patriots.

## ROAD TO ROME

It was chiefly in the western half of the country—Istria, Croatia, Dalmatia and Bosnia—that the national reaction to the armistice was swiftest and most effective. “Old” Serbia remained relatively passive. But the partisans of Croatia and the west rallied under the banner of Joseph Borz, a former Zagreb metalworker who had fought in the International Brigade in Spain and who is now one of the world-famous figures of the war under his soubriquet of Tito.

There was heavy fighting in the neighbourhood of the “Irredentist” towns of Trieste and Gorizia in the far north-west and around Fiume. But all along the Dalmatian coast and on the islands there was activity. Several of the smaller ports remained open throughout most of September, and at Split the partisans seized the town and maintained a force there for seventeen days.

But, lacking planes or any means of protection by anti-aircraft guns, the patriots had little chance at that time of retaining control of any major town or any large area of plain. For the time being they were driven back to the mountains and were severely harassed even there. At a later date British and American material began to arrive in some quantities, and Tito’s forces were able to resume offensive operations. Meanwhile, it had been possible only to send a few trifling consignments across, and, from the time when we occupied the heel of Italy in late September, to evacuate some of the wounded, both women and men, to Bari and other ports in the peninsula under our control.

I saw something of these guerrillas during the early days of October. A number of them had been housed in an Italian hospital at the village of Modugno outside Bari. Just as, in the military sphere, we had been caught unprepared for action, so, in the realm of refugee administration, we lacked the means of coping with the wounded and the escaped prisoners. Things sorted themselves out eventually, but for a time the partisan wounded were dependent upon the good graces of the Italian civilian authorities in towns and villages which were under British military control. This was anything but fortunate from the point of view of both the well-being and the *amour propre* of the

partisans, who naturally resented the apparent lack of interest in them shown by the British.

In the hospital of Modugno I discovered the first batch of wounded to be brought to Italy—twenty-five men, five women and one twelve-year-old boy. All had been engaged in the fighting near Split in September. They had rounded up the Italian garrison of the town, secured their arms and then either established themselves at various strong-points in the town and neighbourhood or made off to the hills. They believed that they could have held the German forces but for the weight of air attack that was brought to bear upon them. Most of those whom I saw in hospital had been wounded by machine-gun fire from low-flying aircraft. In farm carts, wheelbarrows and other primitive means of transport they had been brought down to the coast, which meant on an average a ten-hour journey, jolting over devious mountain tracks with the necessity of keeping a constant sharp look-out for German patrols. From the coast they had been conveyed in a small motor-boat over to Bari.

The girl guerrillas were an interesting product of the totalism of modern war. I saw four or five of these the first time I visited Modugno and many more subsequently. They were sitting up in bed, smoking cigarettes and wearing their jaunty little forage caps with the red star of the partisans which is the only distinguishing uniform that they possess. The youngest of them was no more than seventeen, the eldest only twenty-eight.

It is a grimly heroic experiment in co-educational warfare. There had been no deliberate mobilisation of the women in Yugoslavia. This Amazon army was an entirely spontaneous growth. The women went because, with their country overrun and their towns and villages in ruins, the urge to follow the men into the mountains was natural and irresistible. It wasn't always necessity which drove these modern Maid Marians to the greenwood: to a great extent it was predominantly an emotional impulse similar to that which sent so many of the young men of England to take part in the Spanish War. (I know that in the case of Spain there was sound logic as well as emotion to support the decisions of those who went to fight



against Fascism, but I do not propose to let myself be drawn into a digression.)

The adhesion of these girls to the partisan forces didn't date only from the armistice; for months they had been slipping off singly and in groups of two or three to the mountains. I didn't feel that their experiences—most of them had been fighting for months—had made military automata of them or had ironed out their essential femininity. There was nothing uniform about those four particular girls. Sonia Matiasa was the most obviously experienced warrior of the four, and probably the most politically conscious as well. She was only twenty, but she had been fighting since the first day that a partisan band was formed in the neighbourhood of Split. She was acknowledged as the nonpareil with the hand-grenade (most of the partisans had no other weapons except perhaps an old rifle of the last war and a few clips of cartridges), and she claimed to have captured an Italian officer single-handed. At any rate, she produced his revolver as evidence of the fact. She had been wounded in both thighs and was awaiting an operation.

She talked with gusto of her experiences in the fighting against the Germans and the Italians. One ought to have been shocked at seeing a girl of twenty count up on her fingers, with obvious satisfaction, the number of enemy soldiers whom she had killed. And yet . . . I wonder. . . . Environment conditions character. In England Sonia would have put this same physical vigour and gusto into the local hockey team, or conceivably into the Women's Institute. As it was, having been born into a country subject to wars and invasions and not being familiar with the works of Messrs. Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard, she had reacted in the way in which any vigorous and spirited young human animal might be expected to react.

Zirka Grimani, the woman of twenty-eight, thin and pale, with dark eyes and a peculiar Rossetti-like intensity of feature and expression, was obviously no natural guerrilla like Sonia. She had gone into the hills when her husband went, because it seemed the only thing to do, and she had fought because there was no room for any man or woman among the partisans who was not prepared to fight. But quite obviously Zirka,

who was of the *spirituelle* type, would be happier when it was possible to resume a normal and tranquil way of life.

As for the other two, Sonia Lovric was just a school girl with the large dreamy eyes which unkind people describe as "soulful." I don't know what were the motives or inducements that led her to join the partisans, for she was far too shy to talk but, given an English environment—Cheltenham or Tunbridge Wells—Sonia's "inner" life would probably have been concentrated upon a "pash" for the English mistress. Xenia Kovacic, the baby of the party, was just an extremely pretty seventeen-year-old girl. She might well have joined the movement merely for the excitement of the experience; it would not have been surprising. But if so, she had stayed the course. She had been three months in the hills with her rifle. She too produced her captured Italian revolver.

I found that I didn't want to ask whether she had killed a man to get it.

From the time of Hippolyta onwards there have been occasions when, stimulated by the extreme peril of their country, the women have gone to war. It doesn't happen often, but when it does I am quite sure that it is merely ridiculous for the men to feel shocked or see anything "unnatural" in this. When I was a child large numbers of men were working themselves up into a terrified hysteria about "Votes for Women." And in the present war I have seen British War Correspondents fighting, with that simple-hearted unanimity which characterises a vested interest, against the admission of women to any of the privileges of their fraternity. And each time the men have been wrong.

No; the women were "taking it." There was no doubt of that. They had proved able to stand the strain of winter weather in the hills, and in moments of crisis they used to rise to the occasion with a degree of heroism unsurpassed by any of the men. To be scrupulously fair, I have to admit, after going into the matter with some care, that they didn't quite compare with the men in the day to day routine work of a soldier's life.

I do not believe that this life of wandering and fighting is having any permanently deranging effect upon the natures of the women. They say quite simply that when the Germans have been driven out of their country they ask nothing better

than to resume family life with husband and children, but that any such life is impossible for the present and they look for no personal life until the enemy have been expelled. There is about them a touch of the self-dedication of Joan of Arc. It was only partially in a spirit of bravado that seventeen-year-old Xenia flourished her captured Italian revolver, nor did Sonia Matiasha strike me as brutalised when she told me that she had herself killed "many Germans."

There were two requests that these girls made. The first was that I should write everything I could which would bring home to the British Government, the British High Command, the British public the need for arms, but especially aircraft, to be sent to the partisan forces. Secondly, they asked that their names might be quoted on the British radio news bulletin to Yugoslavia, so that their families might know that they were now in safety. That was all that they asked for themselves.

Those two requests, and the order in which they were preferred, were the key to the fighting spirit of the partisans, whether men or women.

But I am forgetting twelve-year-old Dravko Jurina. He was a slightly-built fair-haired child, looking no older than an English boy of seven. His military career was over already, for his right leg had been amputated at the knee.

"I ran away from my home at Makarska six months ago," he told me, "because my father was fighting with the partisans and I wanted to join him."

Dravko had been employed as a messenger between various units of Tito's forces.

"One day I was carrying a letter to an officer when I found myself among a lot of Germans. I ran away across the fields. They fired at me, but they didn't follow me."

Dravko was wounded in the heel and ankle, but he kept going for an hour and succeeded in delivering his message. There was no means of treating his wounds adequately at the time. As soon as possible he was evacuated to Bari, but it was too late to save his leg. That is the war record of this twelve-year-old child. The nurse told me that he used to cry in bed at night for his mother, and because he was hungry.

Dravko and the many other little boys who fought in

Yugoslavia against the Germans remind me of the boy in Shakespeare's "Coriolanus," who speaks one immortal line :

"I'll run away until I'm bigger. Then I'll fight!"

That single line incarnates the whole spirit of the resistance inside Europe.

### XIII. Bari, Foggia, Naples, Capri

WHEN the balance-sheet for the critical month of September is made up it will be seen that our losses or, if you like, our lost opportunities, were greatly in excess of our gains. We gained Corsica and Sardinia. We lost in northern and central Italy. We lost on points in Yugoslavia, and such points as were scored were the work of Tito and his partisans, not of the Anglo-American forces, and were only to a very limited extent the outcome of such armaments as we were able to send. We lost in the Balkan Peninsula, as a whole; the battle went by default, for we never challenged the Germans. We lost ignominiously in the Aegean islands. But to set against this depressing sequence of defeats in battles which were not even contested on our side, there was one positive gain in southern Italy. We obtained control of the Foggia airfields.

On the evening of September 9, the day after the Italian armistice and only a few hours after the Salerno landing, units of the British First Airborne Division landed at Taranto in the heel of Italy. The landing was unopposed, which was fortunate, since it had been undertaken with a very minimum of shipping and, being regarded as wholly subsidiary to the Fifth Army operation on the west coast of Italy, it is unlikely that it would have received any increment. However, the Italians themselves facilitated our landing, Taranto passed bloodlessly into our hands, and two days later Brindisi was also occupied.

A new situation, probably not anticipated by the Allied High Command, was now developing. The Salerno landing, which had been made in considerable strength and on which high hopes had been built, was meeting with considerable and bitter

opposition and was proving decidedly sticky. On the other hand, the largely improvised landing of less than a single Division on the further side of Italy promptly produced important strategic gains without loss to ourselves. That is constantly happening in war. The major blow falls short of expectations, and some subsidiary effort, developed as an afterthought and with weak forces, obtains more considerable results. Napoleon, with the bulk of his forces, has his work cut out to win the day at Jena, while Davoust, with a detachment scarcely more than half the strength of that of his Emperor, achieves a far more brilliant success at Auerstadt. Ludendorff is firmly held at Arras (in March, 1918), where success might have brought him decisive results, but further south he has little difficulty in advancing with almost embarrassing ease from St. Quentin to Montdidier, a success which exceeded the scope of his original plan. There are few better tests of creative generalship than the speed with which a commander adapts his plans to meet success in a relatively unexpected quarter as well as to cope with failure in the sector where he has pinned his chief hopes.

General Alexander was quick to modify his plans to meet the new situation. Despite the ever-lengthening line of the Eighth Army's communications, he had not hesitated to take the decision to urge it forward during the critical week-end (September 11-13) at Salerno, with a view to establishing contact with the Fifth Army in the neighbourhood of Agropoli and Pæstum and easing the pressure upon their front. The first official contact between patrols of the two Armies was made five miles west of Vallo on Thursday, September 16. On September 20 the town of Potenza, the point of junction of roads from Calabria, Apulia and Salerno area and the centre of the natural connecting links between those regions, was taken by the Canadians. The critical period at the beach-head was now over, and the Anglo-American forces were now passing over to the offensive. General Alexander determined to switch the Eighth Army over from the Calabrian toe, where it had completed its task, to the Apulian heel around Taranto, Brindisi and Bari for a swift drive up to Foggia and beyond. The prospects were good, since whatever forces the German Command had held in that area had clearly been drawn off to re-

inforce the pressure against Salerno. We should have three excellent ports for supply, and the lengthy road communication up the Calabrian coast could be eliminated.

I do not know precisely when this decision was taken. It certainly cannot have been later than September 17 and was, in all probability, several days earlier. It was a wise and soldierly choice and it yielded good results. General Montgomery pointed out that the composition of Eighth Army would have to be modified. Neither the Canadians nor the Fifth Division were yet in a position to shift their base from Calabria. Fiftieth and Fifty-First, who had so long a record of African fighting behind them, were destined to return home on leave at the earliest opportunity, as was the Malta Brigade. But Seventy-Eighth Division, which had fought at Centuripe and had pursued the enemy to Randazzo, was available and could be put in immediately to take over from First Airborne. Subsequently, Indian and New Zealand Divisions from Middle East, Poles and French were to be brought into the line. And somewhere in the distant future was looming the slightly disturbing prospect of Free Italians.

For several days everything proceeded with astonishing smoothness. Taranto had been occupied on September 9, Brindisi on September 11. On September 18 a tiny force of our airborne troops disembarked at, and seized, Bari, the best port of the three. Taranto port had suffered severely from British air bombardments, notably from the historic attack by Swordfish in November, 1940, but Brindisi and Bari were in perfect condition. I don't believe that a single bomb had been dropped on Bari throughout the war. The force that occupied Bari was of microscopic proportions, the town was known as a stronghold of Fascist sentiment, and there were small German forces established at various points on the road between Bari and Taranto.

The German forces in this area, however, were equally scanty in numbers, and they had less prospect of immediate reinforcement. They blew up the great Apulian viaduct, a magnificent work of engineering, and withdrew northwards. General Alexander had set Termoli on the Adriatic coast on a line due east of Rome as the objective to be reached by October 7. It

was hoped that by this date Campobasso, in the centre of the Apennines, and Naples would be in the hands of the Canadians and Fifth Army respectively. This would give a good line of lateral communications from one Army to the other along the Termoli-Campobasso-Naples road, and provide a jumping-off ground for the next drive forward.

Once it had got its supply line established through the three Apulian ports, Seventy-Eighth Division began to advance with astonishing speed. For a few days Bari had been so lightly held that the story went the rounds of Eighth Army messes that by mutual arrangement the British occupied the town during the day, but allowed the Germans to come in each evening to do their shopping.

Seventy-Eighth Division raced up the coast. Eveleigh confidently employed only the thinnest of skirmishing vanguards to push ahead, knowing that the Germans had no stronger forces with which to oppose them. *O si sic omnes!* He had cleaned up German resistance in the hills around Altamura by September 20. By September 22 he was in Barletta, more than thirty miles beyond Bari along the Adriatic coast. On September 24 he reached the Ofanto river, beyond which lay the open plain of Foggia with its numerous airfields.

Geographically, the terrain was not altogether unlike the country south of Catania, with the Ofanto substituted for the Simeto and Foggia for Gerbini. But this time the enemy had not the means of holding up our advance. That day I met Eveleigh by the roadside. It was a Friday.

"Hallo, Buckley!" he roared. "Come to see us take Foggia? We shan't be there to-morrow or the next day. We shall be there on Monday."

And sure enough, he was.

The advance during those days was in some ways reminiscent of the first phase of Tunisia. Large stretches of country were occupied by tiny mobile forces, and neither side was at first in any position to consolidate. On the Saturday I happened to witness, in fact I almost ran into, a Lilliputian tank skirmish on the fringe of the Foggia plain. There were not more than three or four tanks involved on either side; and coming upon it suddenly I was able to lean over a gate leading into a meadow

by the roadside and, from a position at right angles to either force, to watch the tanks potting innocuously at one another less than a mile away. It looked like a toy battle. It really was a beautiful little miniature. It seemed only to require the addition of a thin, oval-shaped gilt frame. The fishing smacks were lying out to sea in full view of the battlefield, their white sails sharply defined against an azure sky, and in the middle distance a tiny toy train (or so it looked) puffed unconcernedly and with ponderous dignity across what was, in theory, a battlefield.

We duly got into Foggia on the Monday. It was a very important gain. Its capture provided us not only with an excellent all-weather aerodrome that would serve us as a bombing base throughout the winter months, but in addition to the numerous satellite airfields the open and level plain, the only plain of any size in southern Italy, provided us with just as many potential airfields as we were able to construct. Nowadays, given favourable surface and soil, the construction of airfields is so rapid an affair that in an area like the Foggia plain it really matters very little whether the enemy has or has not ploughed and cratered his own landing grounds. An Air Commodore, with whom I discussed the prospects at the time, described the potentialities of the Foggia plain as "practically infinite."

We now had an air base in southern Italy from which our bombers could attack objectives in southern Germany and Austria and in the Balkans at closer range and with greater power than ever before. Not the least significant consequence was the fact that from March, 1944, onwards Anglo-American aircraft based on Foggia were able to give strategic air support to the southern Russian front. That was something almost wholly new in air war—troops in one theatre of war receiving air support from bombers operating from another theatre many hundreds of miles away. The bombing of Ploesti (attacked only once before by air, from the Middle East at great cost), of Bucharest and of Sofia was now becoming a practical proposition.

There was no halt at Foggia. Seventy-Eighth Division went on making hay while the sun—the autumn sun—shone. With October at hand the continuance of dry weather could no longer



be relied upon (you get a mixture of glorious weather and chill, wet days in an Italian October, while November and December are probably the wettest months of the year. They were in 1943 !). The modern army is perhaps more dependent on favourable weather than were those of any previous age. This is because road transport on an unprecedented scale is a vital need for contemporary forces in the field. Roads are the lungs of an army, and the cumbrous and unlovely three-ton trucks which follow one another in ceaseless snake-like processions to and from the forward troops constitute the oxygen. Demolition, that bogey of advancing armies, becomes a still more formidable type of obstacle when the weather begins to break, and repair work becomes increasingly difficult under these conditions. River beds which in summer could be crossed by wheeled transport even when the bridges over them had been demolished, now require pontoon or Bailey bridges to carry troops and transport across. And, in addition to all this, no army in the world fights quite so well when it has to attack strongly fortified positions in wet and cold weather. If one must make war in winter, which is never pleasant, it is better to be the defender and enjoy the shelter of well-prepared positions. Winter campaigns are not to be recommended, but even as late as the beginning of October we still believed that it would not be necessary to fight one; we believed that the Germans would go back to the line of the Po without any further very serious attempt to contest our advance save with routine demolitions, and we discussed the advantages of Florence (sometimes in our more optimistic moments it was Venice) as a site for winter quarters.

It was at Termoli, fifty miles beyond Foggia, that the German resistance stiffened. Alexander had laid down October 7 as the date by which Eighth Army should be in possession of Termoli and the road to Campobasso. On the night of October 2-3 a commando landing was made at Termoli. British troops disembarked and, after seizing the town, formed a defensive perimeter around it, while the vanguard of the main body was still many miles further back along the Foggia road. The Germans reacted very sharply. Termoli was like the exposed nerve of a tooth, and our commando landing had given it a

vigorous prod. It had been no part of their plan to surrender the Termoli-Campobasso line so swiftly, and reinforcements were rushed to the sector. The First Parachute Division and the Twenty-Ninth Panzer Grenadiers were joined first by elements of Twenty-Sixth Armoured Division and then by Sixteenth Armoured. This last-named Division had been in the line of the Naples front, where they had suffered severe casualties. They had no sooner been pulled to rest and re-form than they were switched across to the other side of Italy and flung straight into action again. It was the measure of the urgency of the situation in German eyes.

For three days the isolated garrison at Termoli was heavily assaulted. The Germans had guns and tanks on a tongue of high ground overlooking the town, and their infantry attacks at one time broke through our perimeter. But the commandos reinforced by a number of anti-tank guns sent in by sea managed to hold their ground, and on the fourth day the German pressure relaxed, and Seventy-Eighth Division, working up the coast road, joined hands with the garrison.

Termoli was the first action of any scale fought by Eighth Army since their landing in Italy a month earlier. They had advanced all the way from Reggio, a distance of approximately three hundred miles or more, and they had scarcely had to "shiver a lance," as the old-fashioned phrase goes, in the process. After the battle it was said that both the British and the Germans made mistakes in the course of the three days' fighting; the British because they had forgotten how to fight a defensive battle, the Germans because they had for so long been accustomed to retreat that they had forgotten the technique of attack.

Termoli marked the close of the period of easy and bloodless advances up the Adriatic coast. The Germans dropped back a few miles to the Trigno river, where they prepared to stand and fight again. Montgomery followed them to its nearer bank and sat down to build up for his attack. From now onwards Eighth Army would have to fight its way mile by mile.

Meanwhile, on the Fifth Army front, the tension at Salerno had relaxed after nearly ten days of bitter fighting. The Germans, having failed to fling the Anglo-American force back into the sea and being threatened on their southern flank by

the advance of the Eighth Army, gave up and decided to pull out. From that time the fate of Naples was really sealed. The German retreat was efficiently carried out and orderly and Fifth Army could do little more than follow up, keeping close contact with its patrols. General Clark's men had learned a wholesome respect for their antagonists, and they were in no position to turn the retreat into a rout. Once in a way the Germans jabbed back at an over-adventurous patrol. It was in an action of this nature at Scafati, near Pompeii, that three War Correspondents, A. B. Austin of the *Daily Herald*, William Munday of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Stewart Sale of Reuters, lost their lives. Of Sale and Munday I can speak with no intimate personal knowledge, but in Austin the corps of War Correspondents lost one of its most distinguished members. No correspondent in the course of this war, perhaps, had a more thorough devotion to his work, and there was certainly none with a higher personal and professional integrity. An extremely reserved man, a rather dour Scot, Austin seemed only really happy when under shell-fire. He was one of those who really preferred the battlefield to the camp, and I know of no braver companion in the field. He approached his job with the dogged thoroughness characteristic of his race, and he would never leave a story until he was convinced that he had arrived at the final and complete truth. No finer reporter has been produced by this war.

Our progress towards Naples was slowest on our left flank north of Salerno, for the enemy was pivoting on his coastal flank and swinging his inland forces back through Avellino and Benevento. During the last three days of September fighting broke out in Naples between the population, many of whom were able to obtain arms from the municipal authorities, and the Germans. The German troops were daily thinning out and passing northwards through the town. They might, perhaps, had they seen fit, have made the Allies pay very dearly for Naples. Later, in Ortona and Cassino, they gave evidence of their capacity for taking losses while maintaining their ground in grim street-to-street and house-to-house fighting. But at this time the Germans were concentrating on getting back in good order behind the line of the Volturno river, twenty miles farther north. Here a stand could be made, at any rate for a

time, while Kesselring concentrated on the fortification of his winter line.

And so the troops of the Fifth Army entered Naples on the morning of October 1. They found a city as dead as we had found Catania. The port area was a shambles as the result of our repeated bombings, and the Germans had added to the general disorganisation by wrecking the electricity and water supplies and the telephone service. Hardly a shop was open or appeared at that time to have anything to sell. In those grey October days the long Via Roma, which climbs uphill out of the town and in peace-time is the principal thoroughfare, looked singularly desolate, an avenue of shuttered windows.

There were weeks of work to be done before Naples could return to anything like normality.

From September 8 until the middle of October, Italy was nearer to a state of literal anarchy than she has been at any time in the past four centuries. In neither the Allied nor the German-controlled areas was there any organisation that could justly be called an Italian Government. Amgot ruled in Sicily, and although it proved a favourite Aunt Sally for superior people who had not to face the angular and uncompromising problems caused by ruined towns, a shortage of food and almost all necessities of life, and a total lack of the means of transport necessary to set the economic life of the country on its feet, yet good work was being done, people were being fed, refugees sorted out, and public utilities gradually restored.

But a new situation had now been created by the fact that Italy was no longer technically at war. A nominal Italian Government existed in Brindisi where Marshal Badoglio, with the heads of the Army, Navy and Air Force and a stray typist or so sat in the Hotel Internazionale and theoretically administered the province of Apulia from their hotel bedrooms. But they had neither authority nor the means of exercising it. Meanwhile, in the Naples area, Amgot was following on the heels of the advancing armies, but the problems before it in this devastated area were immense. North of the battle-line the Germans ruled solely by machine-guns and firing squads. Mussolini had been lugged back out of captivity and had announced that he "re-

sumed the leadership of Republican Fascism." At the same time he had obligingly declared that the House of Savoy had ceased to rule. But at that time it seemed extremely unlikely that he would be able to rebuild the merest framework of Governmental organisation. It was only the stiffening of German resistance south of Rome that made it possible to re-establish some sort of ersatz Fascism in the north.

The signing of the armistice had a curious but not unexpected effect upon the Italian people in the liberated part of the kingdom. With bland and cynical realism they felt themselves absolved by a stroke of the pen from all responsibility for having made unprovoked war upon their neighbours. That was all finished, and by-gones were by-gones. Similarly, they felt themselves to be disassociated, without further effort on their part from responsibility for twenty years' passive acceptance of tyranny culminating in eight years of raucous support for an aggressive and belligerent foreign policy. In the majority of cases, not in all (I am not speaking here of the professional politicians or of the genuinely convinced democrats), they appeared to experience neither a sentimental loyalty towards Fascism nor a really deep-rooted animosity against it, though when they talked with the English or Americans they knew the right answers. Fascism was simply something that had failed them, and so they shrugged it off. But if the war had been won . . .

There was another curious aspect of the Italian reaction. The realisation that they were no longer, in a technical sense, enemies seemed to breed in some sections of society a new arrogance. It betrayed itself sometimes in very trifling and yet significant incidents. I would put it this way: before the armistice the Italian townsman—the man in the street, literally in the street—used to ask us for a cigarette as a favour; after the armistice he seemed too often to demand them as a right. In the difficult period, before the status and obligations of co-belligerency had been defined, Italian civilians were quite frequently inclined to adopt an independent, not to say truculent, attitude towards our soldiers. I came across some instances of it myself at an early date.

British Military Authority currency had been introduced when we first landed in Sicily. The rate of exchange and the value

of the notes had been explained to the population, and the new currency won almost immediate acceptance. The lire had been heavily devaluated; it was brought down to 400 to the pound sterling, as compared with a pre-war rate of about 70 to the pound or 90 special Tourist Lire. This, of course, represented an excessive and uneconomic devaluation which brought its own consequences in trade. But that occurred later. The main difficulty in the towns of Apulia was to get the tradespeople to accept B.M.A. currency at all. They wouldn't take it in the shops, and the banks refused to change it for lire. That was not the worst.

Walking down one of the main streets in Taranto the day that I arrived in the town I saw a pile of *Eighth Army News*, the official paper of the British soldiers in Italy, lying on the counter at a stationer's shop. *Eighth Army News* is distributed free to British troops, but as I thought that the shop-keeper might have paid something for the privilege of displaying these copies I tossed down two or three B.M.A. lire and picked up a paper. I was promptly told by the officious little Italian behind the counter that my money was not legal currency and that I was not entitled therefore to purchase the paper.

I was too much astonished to do what I ought to have done. I ought promptly to have made a note of the shop and reported the incident to the military authorities. As it was, I merely flung a couple of cigarettes in his face (which was waste of two cigarettes, but I am not of those who lean heavily on my lady nicotine) and walked off with a copy of the paper.

So much for Taranto. The people of Bari, at first, showed signs of being even less co-operative. I arrived in the town with two other officers on September 23. It had been then in our hands for five days, but there were no British troops in the town at that time. They had all passed through in the direction of Foggia. In fact, I believe that for a day or two Major Hibbert, the British liaison officer to the Italians, was the sole representative of His Majesty's Forces in Bari.

We went along to the principal hotel. We asked for rooms for the night. We were blandly informed that we could have no rooms; the hotel was full. We asked for lunch. We were told that we were not entitled to be served with lunch unless

we could produce Italian civilian ration cards ! We were tired and hungry, and through the glass door of the dining-room we could see Italian officers and their lady friends tucking into macaroni. We discussed with one another the advisability of "making a scene" on the spot or officially reporting the incident later and going elsewhere for our lunch. We decided on the latter course.

We found another hotel. This had been commandeered as an Italian officers' mess. We were none too clear at this time on whose side the Italian army was supposed to be fighting. However, we were courteously received and given lunch as guests of the Italian army ; but it was rather humiliating to have to go cap in hand to these people for our lunch.

Immediately afterwards we sought out Major Hibbert, the British liaison officer, and explained that we wished for accommodation in the town, preferably at the Hotel Imperiale, from which we had been so arrogantly repulsed earlier in the day. Major Hibbert was well-intentioned, but explained that owing to the new status of Italy he was no longer in a position to *command* anything. A fortnight earlier, before the armistice, he would have been Amgot officer in charge of Bari with full powers to commandeer as he saw fit. Now he could merely *request*. We asked him to "request" accommodation for us at the Hotel Imperiale.

He rang up the Questura and placed his request. And then for two hours we waited impatiently in Major Hibbert's offices, while the Questura, responding reluctantly to periodic telephonic prods, explained that steps were being taken, but that it seemed impossible to find a room anywhere in Bari. This was the most utter rubbish. The Questura could have commandeered as many rooms as we needed in a couple of minutes. Finally it seemed that we were going to be treated to the supreme humiliation of being offered a single small, grimy and sinister room in some house of dubious repute up a back street. At that we shook the dust of Bari off our feet and, with a mental resolve to return and have the whole matter out next day, we drove back to spend the night in Brindisi. As the result of our tedious delays in Bari we were very late in arriving back at the Hotel Internazionale in Brindisi, and found that it was far

too late for us to be served with any dinner. However, we had an army ration-box with us, and so we whistled up one of the hotel servants and asked him to open it for us. The man went about the job sullenly, protesting that it was no part of his work. At that I lost my temper. I had had just about enough of Italians for one day, and I started to swear at him good and hard, using words that I didn't know I knew.

At that moment a young R.A.F. squadron-leader passed through the hotel dining-room. He heard me swearing and saw fit to intervene. He told me that it was people like myself who were letting down the British name and making it difficult for the Italians to co-operate willingly with us. . . .

Next day we returned to Bari, eager for blood. We went straight to the Hotel Imperiale perfectly ready to be extremely unpleasant. But we found a very different, a positively servile, atmosphere prevailing. For only that morning Air-Marshal Conyngham, head of the Allied Air Forces in Italy, had visited the hotel and requested a room. They were foolish enough to try and treat him in the same way as they had treated us. "Maori" Conyngham is the last person in the world with whom it is advisable to adopt a truculent attitude. When he was refused a room he promptly commandeered an entire floor of the hotel for the R.A.F., and that was that.

After that Bari became a very pleasant place in which to pause for a few days before following the wars to the north. The population of the town rapidly came to the conclusion that the British had arrived to stay, and it soon became obvious that they knew on which side their bread was buttered. It was the first town of any size that I had seen in a war area, since leaving Cairo, that was totally undamaged by bombs or shell-fire and whose inhabitants appeared to have suffered no particular privations as the result of the war. There had been no German troops in Bari, so far as one could discover, and the number of Germans who had visited or passed through the place seemed to have been small. Amazingly, one found the shops full of luxury goods that one had not seen since the beginning of the war, or had seen only in Cairo and Alexandria.

At the depreciated rate of the lire these goods were, by English standards, amazingly cheap. On Monday, September 27,



Eighth Army Headquarters arrived in the neighbourhood of Bari, and the men of the Eighth Army went to town in a big way. For three days the entire army seemed to be flowing and eddying through the streets and shops of the town. I know that this buying up of luxury goods, at an artificially favourable rate of exchange, by the conquering army is just the sort of thing that we publicly deprecated when the German troops did it in Paris in 1940. And, to be quite frank, this was Paris on a small scale, with the boot on the other foot.

And I don't for one moment blame the men of the Eighth Army. In fact, I took part in the purchasing campaign myself. And just the same thing happened in Naples a little later on. The fact is that when men had been living a more or less rugged and spartan existence for weeks and months, with a complete absence of luxuries and the barest minimum of comforts, the desire to indulge in an orgy of spending becomes intense. When your expenditure has been limited perhaps for several months to the prosaic business of settling mess bills and the not much more enlivening transactions at N.A.A.F.I. and canteens, there is a kind of wild poetry about indiscriminate "shopping." I know this feeling myself in all its intensity. To saunter through a town, seeing the streets full of shops and the shops full of purchasable goods is to experience the sensation of being in Aladdin's cave with an obliging Djinn prepared—for a consideration—to provide anything that one takes a fancy to.

As a rule the purchases that are made during those first few days of frenzied shopping are of luxuries rather than necessities. Just because the purchases of the average soldier while he is campaigning have to be of such a grimly utilitarian nature, there is a natural reaction in favour of fripperies when the opportunity occurs. There is comparatively little that a soldier can usefully carry around with him in the field. But if he has a dutiful wife he will certainly have been informed of all the things that "you can't get in England now," in addition to the fact that "cosmetics and silk stockings are always welcome."

And so it did my heart good to see the British soldier methodically going about the business of buying up Bari. The rate of exchange at first told against the shop-keepers. It was a hardship, of course, but it scarcely compared with the sufferings of

the discharged Greek soldiers, for instance, who month after month had been dying of hunger in the streets of Athens and Salonika. I wonder how many of the smug merchants of Bari had ever spared a thought for the sufferings which they had tacitly co-operated in inflicting upon the Greeks.

And, of course, all too rapidly, the rate of exchange was cancelled out by the rapid rise of prices. They went up and up and up. Soon goods of all types were just as expensive as they would have been before the war; a month or two elapsed, and they were far, far more expensive. And still the prices continued to rise. Naples was much worse than Bari in this respect. Partly, one is bound to admit, this was due to the presence in the former city of large numbers of American troops who, with far more money in their pockets than their opposite numbers in the British Army, were less inclined to consider expense and minded not at all, so it seemed, however outrageously they were swindled. In Naples, also, the shopkeepers had been more wily than those of Bari. In Bari they had all their goods in the shop window, and the Eighth Army simply went through them like a dose of salts. In a week or two there was comparatively little in the way of luxury goods left to buy. But in Naples they knew a trick worth two of that. For weeks after our occupation there was very little to be seen in the shops. First of all, the Neapolitans held their stock back until they were quite clear that the British and American troops were there for keeps and that their currency would not be rendered worthless by the return of the Germans. Then they held their goods back in order to take full advantage of the steady rise in prices. Bit by bit they released their stuff, with the result that there was far more to buy in Naples at Christmas-time than there had been in October, and more of certain commodities in the following March even than there had been at Christmas. An awful lot of the most utter trash got sold to the British Innocents Abroad, particularly cheap, tinny, imitation jewellery of the present-from-Margate variety. But there were some wonderful purchases to be made by the discriminating buyer.

And so we spent some blissful days, which I don't regret, based on Bari. It was satisfactory to be able to buy silk stock-

ings for one's womenfolk at 4s. 6d. a pair; it was remarkable to find Chanel No. 5 at only 15s. a bottle (the following January I saw some in Naples priced at £8 a bottle); pleasantest of all, perhaps, to find Asti Spumante at only 4s. 6d. a bottle. (It pretty soon rose to 30s. a bottle, and then became unobtainable.)

Meanwhile it was extremely pleasant to live in a large abandoned villa on the outskirts of Bari, a villa with a huge central hall, rather like what I imagine (perhaps quite wrongly) a Roman *atrium* to have been, on the ceiling of which were painted the most delectable goddesses and plump little cherubs. The weather was just passing through that phase when the intensity of summer heat had finally departed, but before the chill of autumn has cast a shadow over the year. One could still, if one wanted to enjoy one's leisure later in the day, get up at half-past five in the morning without discomfort and type one's despatch (dealing with the previous day's events) before breakfast. That gave one the excuse for a late breakfast, which is always pleasant, time to dress and shave in a leisurely manner afterwards, followed by a glass of Asti Spumante in the middle of the morning, which is the perfect time to take it. At its best, it tastes very like French champagne (or you can make believe that it does); at its worst it is no worse than cider.

I cannot talk about Bari and Naples without talking about Capri.

Of Capri there are only two essential things to be said, only two pieces of advice to be given. The first is to recommend you to go there; the second is to suggest that, if you can't go there, you read Norman Douglas's "South Wind," which marvellously interprets the atmosphere and character of the island, besides being the bedside book of any civilised man.

Moorehead, Clifford and I decided quite abruptly to visit Capri. We were transferring from Eighth to Fifth Army area about that time, which would bring us to Naples in any case, and Capri seemed too good to miss. It was a lovely blue day in mid-October when we crossed the channel that divides the island from Naples, crossed with the pious but unfulfilled intention of returning the same day, because I had qualms about the situation on the Volturno, where I felt that a British attack was imminent.

Capri lies only a few miles from the mainland; it lies in

full view of the bay of Salerno, where the grimmest battle of the campaign had been fought; it had been under the occupation of a couple of hundred German troops, who had established a radio location station and anti-aircraft batteries there. It would have been natural therefore to have expected that this island would have felt, to some extent, the impingement of the war that was raging on its doorstep.

Not a bit of it! Capri, the Escapist Paradise par excellence, had escaped the war, largely, so it seemed, by simply ignoring its existence. It has had a tradition of escapism dating from the time of the Roman Empire, and one felt that it was not going to allow a trifle like a world war to disturb its balmy and languorous serenity. We realised that from the moment when we disembarked at the little quay. The usual peace-time throng of longshore touts began to buzz around us, eager to fix an excursion to the Blue Grotto, to the lofty hilltop village of Anacapri, or to the still more inaccessible villa where the Emperor Tiberius was in the habit of practising his depressing anti-social vices.

I do not want to take the money out of Herr Baedeker's pocket, assuming that there *are* pockets in a shroud, and so I shall not attempt a guide-book description of Capri. I shall not talk about the entrancing scenery, nor about the brilliant and colourful little square, nor yet of the luxury hotels. We just got sucked into the atmosphere in about five and a half minutes. We were carrying, as a form of viaticum, a letter from Gracie Fields to the tenant of her villa on the island (God only knows how the note had succeeded in reaching us, but we felt that for once in our lives we were touching the fringe of real greatness). But you need no passport to Capri; the island simply gathers you in. At noon, if it is fine, and it usually is fine on Capri, the little tables in the tiny square, which looks so ridiculously theatrical, begin to fill up. For the Capriotes, having just risen, are about ready for their first champagne cocktail before they face lunch. The shops themselves take their tone from this hedonist society; you will not find one of them open before eleven-thirty in the morning. Until about that hour Capri sleeps. But as it does not go to bed before 3 A.M. as a rule, one ought not to be too severe with it.

But from noon onwards the little tables begin to fill up and the waiters scuttle about with bottles. There are far more women than men, women gaily dressed, wearing brilliant scarves on their heads or shoulders, but with the inevitable tedious blue trousers that seem to be *de rigueur*. Such men as there are are usually several years younger than the women whom they accompany; their silk shirts look just a little too expensive, their trousers too well creased, their hair too oilily sleek and well parted, their wrist-watches far too small.

The conversation at any of the tables might have been lifted *in toto* from any time during the 1922-1937 period. The war is something which is simply not discussed. One feels that it would be rather bad form to refer to it; it would be rather like introducing the topic of the housemaid's illegitimate baby. The furthest that a Capriote would permit herself to go in that direction would be to intone a faint, detached complaint about the shortage of bread—which at that time had to be brought almost daily from the mainland—or the total absence of cigarettes. For bread really was scarce in Capri. That was one of the paradoxes. There appeared to be quite a lot of cake, but there was very little bread. I believe that there was for a time quite an acute shortage of water. But what did that matter when every villa possessed a cellar amply stocked with vintage wine?

It really is very difficult to find a restaurant where you can get a meal in Capri in war-time. But if you are invited, and you probably will be, to lunch or dinner at any of the numerous villas sprinkled over the island, you will have no cause to worry, for you will get an exceedingly good meal. In the same way, to develop the general paradox, it would probably be impossible, or extremely difficult, to purchase a single suit of "sensible" clothes. (Sensible! the very word is like a knell!) But you can buy plenty of silk and jewellery.

For the careless exhortation of Marie Antoinette really has come true in Capri. Having little bread, the good people of Capri are reduced to eating cake.

The social pyramid in Capri is surely of a very odd shape. As a young man I lived for a time in a village in Kent where nearly everyone except myself appeared to be extremely well

off. It was the kind of village where there are at least twelve squires, or would-be squires, to every one peasant. I used mentally to indulge myself with visions of a *jacquerie* in the village of B——. I imagined a hasty meeting of pallid land-owners armed with shot-guns. I could almost hear them whispering to one another: "Have you heard the news? The peasant has risen." Well, Capri is rather like that. There are peasants, of course, but they are singularly unobtrusive. Somewhere at the bottom of this social pyramid there are a number of pure Italians who till the soil and live probably essentially similar lives to those of their ancestors in the days of Tiberius. Like diminutive Atlases they carry on their shoulders this immense superstructure of the wealthy and the cosmopolitan. For the scarved and trousered ladies and the immaculate young men, who dance far too well, are not frequently Italian. They are probably a *macédoine* of races—American, French, English, Swiss, German, Italian, Turk, Argentine—and being so, they have no national ties.

It was in vain that the familiar features of Mr. Churchill frowned down from a poster in the little square; in vain that the legend beneath his portrait announced, in Italian, "Justice will be firm. It will be implacable." Such impingement of the sterner realities of the day did not even crack the magnificent highly-coloured enamel of Capri. The *déracinés* ladies and gentlemen, representative of a score of nations, at the café tables were not losing any sleep about the apportioning of justice among the aggressor nations, for it would have been difficult to discover which of them derived from an aggressor nation and which from an aggressed.

The tarmac road which leads out of the town up the hills towards Anacapri was seared with the unmistakable marks of tank traps. During the seven years in which I have been a War Correspondent I have become familiar with those marks. And so, after all, there had been tanks on the island. But no one seemed able to remember how many there had been or how long ago it was. Again I had the feeling that it would be bad form if I pursued my questions. I did, however, learn that the German officers had not been particularly popular on the island. For they had kept themselves to themselves, and they

had not mixed in the social life of Capri. They had gone there to do a job of work, and the Capriotes resented the fact that they had preferred to do it rather than to be lured by the seductions of the island.

You couldn't get Capri to take the war seriously. If Hitler had pursued Mussolini to the island and there assassinated him, or vice versa, in the theatrical little square, I feel that the Capriotes at the café tables would merely have raised questioning eyebrows at one another, speculating whether this was not some fresh variant of the improbably coloured elephants which, I am told by those who know, trouble the visions of those who look upon the gin when it is pink. Then they would shrug their shoulders and order another drink with a greater alcoholic content.

Our last evening on Capri the three of us were dining at the villa of a charming and witty Frenchwoman, in most ways a very typical Capriote. The house and the dinner and—I hope I may say—the conversation were in every sense of the word “civilised.” But there was a tiny fly in the ointment. For our hostess had been rung up by a friend and told that if she listened to the radio bulletin at a quarter past nine that evening she would hear some sensational news.

When she told us this we looked at one another, and our hearts sank into our boots. Something tremendous must have happened: Hitler must have been assassinated, or Germany must have surrendered, or something of that sort. (We were sure it wasn't really anything so important as that.) And we were out on a limb when we ought to have been at the centre of things ready to dash off swiftly-written crisp commentaries on the local reactions. We had been playing truant when we should have been working.

At nine-fifteen our hostess switched over from the languorous waltzes which the radio had been creamily churning out, and turned on the news.

A minute or two of hushed expectancy, and then the level voice of the announcer was heard informing us that “the Government of Marshal Badoglio has declared war upon Germany.”

“Oh, my God!” exclaimed the lady. “Is that all?”

Petulantly she swivelled the knob around, catapulting us back through guttural German and staccato French, back into the dream world of dance music.

That was Capri in October, 1943, set and crystallised in a period when the word "Munich," for instance, connoted nothing more warlike than Grand Opera and nothing more vulgar than beer. Vivid and colourful, cynical and sophisticated, the Capriotes had almost succeeded in by-passing the catastrophe of civilisation at their doorstep. It was difficult to adjust this frieze of characters who had stepped bodily out of the pages of Petronius and Proust and Norman Douglas into the pattern of the Second World War. It was not possible to take Capri entirely seriously; it was easier and more pleasant to sit in the warm sunshine, sipping one's *apéritif* in one of the most civilised atmospheres and certainly the most scenically brilliant setting in Europe. I enjoyed my spell on Capri, but I was not sorry when it was time to return to the mainland. For I have read the Odyssey and I am able to recognise the island of Circe when I see it.

And meanwhile, as the tables in the little square began to fill up once more, a very few miles away civilisation was being saved by the men who at that moment were fighting their way across the muddy Volturno river in landing craft and open boats, facing a hail of mortar and machine-gun fire, fighting and dying under a chill grey October sky.

## XIV.

## Winter of Discontent

GENERAL CLARK lost no time in following up the retreat of the German forces from Naples in the direction of the Volturno. Patrols kept close contact over the intervening twenty miles of country, and the enemy certainly showed no disposition to linger. In little more than a week he was back upon the further bank of the river, and Clark immediately began preparations to force the crossing.



## ROAD TO ROME

The battle of the Volturno was remarkable in that it was the first operation in the Mediterranean theatre in which the chief obstacle was provided by a water line. The problems which were presented by this action were, therefore, of a type with which our troops were quite unfamiliar. They had had no occasion to operate on river lines in Africa. The numerous *wadis* of Libya, though sometimes their sandy bottoms proved a treacherous surface for wheeled transport, could always be crossed by infantry and could normally be turned from the south. In Sicily the battle of the Simeto was in essentials a battle for the development of a bridgehead already won by the action of airborne troops rather than a battle to establish the actual river crossings. The battle of Mareth, where our whole plan of attack nearly went astray owing to a failure to get the anti-tank guns across the Wadi Zigzaou, is perhaps the closest parallel, but it was not in the true sense a river line battle.

As such, therefore, the battle of the Volturno is the prototype of the subsequent actions that were to be fought on the Trigno, the Sangro, the Garigliano and the Rapido.

As the rivers of southern Italy go, the Volturno is a broad stream. In the neighbourhood of Capua it is about as wide as the middle reaches of the Thames, which indeed it somewhat resembles as it meanders among flat and lush meadows reminiscent of the gentle country around Reading or Marlow. At the mouth it was about four hundred yards in width.

As is the case with most river line defensive positions the Volturno, in addition to having its coastal flank protected by the sea, was covered in its shallower upper waters by a chain of hills to the north-east of Capua which formed a natural flank-guard. The German defence was organised in three layers. Down on the river bank itself, adequately covered from view by clumps of willow and other foliage, were small nests of machine-gunners, whose task was to prevent the infantry from crossing. Some few hundred yards further back, protected by a series of dykes which intersected the flat plains beyond the river was the dug-in mortar line, which would provide the core of resistance after we had got some part of our infantry across. Still further back were the batteries of field guns and anti-tank

guns, whose primary task would be to destroy our assault and supply vehicles as they crossed the river.

Except that the local German commander does not seem to have possessed, or employed, the number of tanks of which he could have possibly made use in counter-attacking our infantry, the German defence was organisation on a classic scale. Yet river lines, so attractive to pins and paper strategists, are not really at all easy of defence. Frederick the Great, who was well qualified to judge, writing on the subject in his "Memoirs on the Art of War," comes to the conclusion that a river line of any length is untenable, and more often than not military history has justified him. The proper way of defending a river line is not to cling at all costs to holding the river bank itself but rather to allow the attacker to pass across a certain proportion of his force and then either to overwhelm him, when he is at a disadvantage, with a counter-attack or at any rate to keep his bridges and crossing places continually under observation and under fire. If carried out effectively the latter course will prevent the attacker from developing his operation, and he will be tactically in a rather worse position after he has crossed the river than before. Broadly speaking that is the way in which the Germans in the last war defended their positions above the river Aisne for more than three years.

The assault was planned on the assumption that the enemy would concentrate his main strength in the middle and lower part of the river, where the country is flat and open, rather than in the hills further inland. With this in mind, crossings were planned at several points along the whole length, but the real push was to come from the American Thirty-Fourth Division among the hills on the right in the neighbourhood of Caiazzo. Meanwhile the British Fifty-Sixth and Forty-Sixth Divisions on the left would get across wherever they could and pin as many German troops as possible down in the plain, while the Americans, once across, would work along the top of the hills, turning the coastal positions.

During the nights immediately preceding our attack a good deal of reconnaissance work was carried out by small patrols, both Allied and German, who crossed the river in small boats, one-man rafts, rubber dinghies, or even by swimming. Our

patrols aimed at finding suitable landing places on the further bank, those of the enemy sought to discover our main points of concentration. On one occasion, two such boats proceeding from opposite banks of the river passed within a comparatively short distance of one another. A few shots were exchanged and then each boat proceeded onwards to accomplish its mission on the further bank. And that was all the truth there was in the lurid stories that were current at the time about moonlit mid-stream clashes between British and German flotillas.

On the night of October 12-13 the assault developed. The American Thirty-Fourth Division crossed high up at Triflesco. Our Fifty-Sixth Division made a feint at Capua in the centre, while Forty-Sixth Division loaded infantry and tanks on to landing craft which then, instead of attempting to cross in the face of powerful enemy fire, sailed down to the mouth of the river and then, turning north, effected a landing on the sea coast a little way to the rear of the German positions.

But although they got ashore our forces were closely hemmed in by thick minefields laid by the enemy along a beach which it had not been possible for us to reconnoitre. The tanks that were landed were unable to get clear of the minefields, and the infantry had to be content to dig themselves in on the fringe of the beach and hope for the best.

Three days' hard fighting followed. The Germans had a nominal strength of three Divisions defending the line of the Volturno, Fifteenth Panzer Grenadiers on the coast, Hermann Goering in the centre and the Third Panzer Grenadiers, a fresh Division newly arrived from Rome, in the hills on the left. During the Wednesday and Thursday of that week (October 13-14) the enemy brought considerable pressure against our coastal force, but meanwhile Forty-Sixth Division was able to throw a bridge across the river at Cancellio and pushed further troops on to the northern bank. And the Americans, in their turn, were working well over the river at Triflesco, where the hills come close down to the river and where there is not a network of dykes to be encountered. Their advance correspondingly eased the position of Fifty-Sixth Division in the neighbourhood of Capua, and by working along the high

ground beyond the river they gradually compelled the withdrawal of the German forces.

After three days it was all over. Each part of the attacking army had carried out the job assigned to it. The landing at the river mouth, and even the feint attack at Capua had diverted German troops and guns, while the American advance, under cover of an excellent artillery barrage which crept from hill-top to hilltop, had turned the whole position and had pulled out the coping stone of the whole Volturno front.

There were a good many tactical lessons to be derived from the battle of the Volturno. The first was the importance of the preliminary artillery bombardment. I am not myself convinced that in the subsequent winter fighting in the mountains such bombardments were always particularly effective, since it is difficult to pin-point hostile gun positions among mountains. But against troops in an open plain bombardments of this nature are sure to do far more damage. Over considerable sectors our preliminary night bombardment blotted out all the enemy machine-gun positions, which formed the first zone of defence, and many of their forward mortar batteries, which formed part of the second. A British infantry officer who was waiting with his platoon, under cover of a low stone wall, for the signal to lead his men across the Volturno told me how the German machine-guns opposite had been eliminated.

"When our bombardment opened," he said, "every machine-gun across the river burst into ragged fire. One by one, during the next ten or twelve minutes, they all fell silent. They simply had no chance. When we went across the river it was all much less tough than we had expected. Shaken men crawled out of holes and ditches with their hands up and surrendered to us."

Those men had been the German machine-gunners.

A second point that emerged was the advantage of making one or more feint attacks. This is a general principle where action against river lines is undertaken, and it applies with increased force in proportion to the length of river line which the enemy had to defend. In attacking the Sangro line several weeks later General Montgomery made effective use of the feint attack on one flank, under cover of an ostentatious smoke screen to divert attention from his real attack on the other flank.

Now, as later, we had experience of the fact that the critical period in any river crossing is seldom the process of passing the infantry across but that of maintaining them there in the face of enemy artillery fire against the bridges and enemy counter-attacks with tanks. Under conditions of that sort the tank once more comes into its own, since it had an opportunity of catching isolated pockets of infantry in exposed positions, neither deeply dug in nor with adequate fire support.

The process is really something of a vicious circle. It's difficult for infantry to maintain themselves beyond a river without close support from tanks or anti-tank guns, and it's difficult for these latter to get across a river until a reasonably deep bridgehead has been established by the infantry so that the river crossings are not swept by close-range fire from the defenders. In essence, that was our main trouble in most of our subsequent river actions. It was most clearly marked, and had the most unfortunate effects, in the first attempt to cross the lower Rapido in January, 1944.

The Germans dropped slowly back, first to the line of hills that rise abruptly out of the coastal plain in the neighbourhood of Sessa Aurunca, and then behind the Garigliano which is some twenty miles beyond the Volturno. It was now that the first real lull occurred in the Italian campaign.

At the time of our original landing in the peninsula at the beginning of September, and for perhaps a month subsequently, it had generally been believed that the Germans would fall back progressively during the autumn to northern Italy and the valley of the Po or more probably the Pisa-Rimini line. It might be a fighting retreat or it might be a retreat merely covered by demolitions. The evidence at first seemed to point in that direction, and I do not think that at this time of day I am revealing any military secret when I say that General Eisenhower was understood to have estimated that the Allied forces would be in Rome by mid-December or very soon after. In a sweepstake in which some of us took part at Fifth Army Headquarters on November 21 the majority of participants were, even at that time, prepared to plump for some date in January for the entry into the capital. My own choice of February 26 was almost the latest date selected.

But some time before the middle of October there was a definite change in the German plan. A change of which we soon began to see and feel the evidences. The decision was taken to hold a line south of Rome, and with that end in view the fortification of the so-called "winter line" from the mouth of the Sangro to the mouth of the Garigliano was undertaken. And although we bit deeply into that winter line at various points, it held us throughout the winter and into the late spring. In that respect the Germans must be adjudged to have succeeded in their object in the winter campaign in Italy.

The principal reason for the change of plan was, in my opinion, the realisation by the enemy Command that our offensive was losing its momentum and that we were not at the time contemplating making use of our sea power to turn the enemy flank by further coastal landings. The German troops had hurriedly evacuated the important islands of Sardinia and Corsica because it was feared that they would be isolated there in the event of a British or American landing in the neighbourhood of Pisa or Livorno. But we made no such landing, and it must have become increasingly clear to the German Intelligence Service that the shipping necessary for such an undertaking was no longer available; it had gone elsewhere.

That, coupled with the near success of the Germans at Salerno, was probably the principal motive that conditioned their decision. No army retreats if it has a reasonable prospect of holding its ground successfully; but by October, 1943, we had become so accustomed to German armies retreating as a matter of course—it was just twelve months since Alamein, and it is a long way from Alamein to the Volturno—that we began to take it for granted that they would continue to go back until they reached some immensely powerful natural barrier. It was not a very sensible belief, for as Ludendorff (I think) has said, one does not tamely surrender whole provinces.

There was another reason, which was favoured by the staff at General Alexander's Headquarters and which was generally regarded as the official explanation of the new plan. In view of the scale which Marshal Tito's partisan movement had assumed, the German Command were believed to feel that a withdrawal to the north would render the linking of the Anglo-

American forces with the Yugoslavs too easy a matter and that in consequence there was a real danger that the whole of the Balkans, or at any rate the western part, would be opened up to the Allies. I am convinced that this was a motive in the change of plan, but I do not believe that it was the predominant one. For, after all, if we had really intended to go into the Balkans from Italy, we were perfectly able to do so once we had obtained firm control of Brindisi and Bari.

One cannot doubt, I think, that the political benefits to be derived from retaining Rome exercised a not inconsiderable influence upon Hitler and the German General Staff. At first it had seemed that Fascism was utterly discredited and shattered and that there was no foundation upon which a pro-Axis party could be built in Italy. But the rescue of Mussolini, coupled with the adherence of Graziani, Farinacci and other well-known and disreputable figures suggested that at least a façade of Italian independence might be erected. And so the world was treated to the pompous farce of "Republican Fascism," a steady flow of impressive paper legislation and the recruitment of hapless Italians, who thought they had seen the last of war, to fight once more under the soiled and tattered banners of Fascismo and under the inspiration of that shabby old tiger, Benito Mussolini. On the other side of the battle-line Marshal Badoglio, genuinely anxious to work his passage and that of Italy back to favour with the Allies, was also engaged in building up a new Italian army. In consequence, from Milan to Catania, countless miserable Carlos and Giovannis, who had fondly hoped that at long last fighting days were over, now began to find themselves crushed between the upper and nether millstone.

And so the decision was taken, and German military dispositions were modified accordingly. It was necessary to increase the number of German Divisions holding the line. At the time of the battle of the Volturno in mid-October there had been only seven. Three more infantry Divisions, the Sixty-Fifth, the Three Hundred and Fifth and the Ninety-Fourth were brought into the line on the left, centre, and right respectively. None of them were Divisions of quite the old quality. The Sixty-Fifth in fact was very poor. At the same time some of the armoured divisions, which had been severely

mauled in the fighting of the past weeks and which were less needed in this mountain country, were pulled out for rest and re-equipment. We were slow to follow their example, and I do not think it is an unfair criticism to say that in the winter operations we were somewhat over-encumbered with tanks.

In general, however, as the Anglo-American forces continued to batter away with one frontal attack after another, the Germans gradually increased the number of their Divisions in the line. By Christmas there were fully a dozen, though many of them were depleted after the hard December battles. The Anzio landing in January, whatever its other shortcomings, did attract yet further Divisions to the Italian front, and by February there were nineteen in the line.

All this force was under the command of Marshal Kesselring, whose name at an earlier stage of the war had usually been associated with the failure of the Luftwaffe to reduce Malta or to intervene effectively in the African battles. Whatever Kesselring's shortcomings as a commander of air forces, he showed energy and resource in the defensive fighting of the long winter months. While he commanded in central Italy, Rommel held an important but somewhat vague authority in the north. He had under him a reservoir of Divisions varying in number, sometimes as many as twenty-five, but at times no more than eight or ten. This body acted as a central reserve or mass of manœuvre for the whole of southern Europe. Rommel appears to have been given wide discretion in the allocation of these Divisions and in his apportioning of them between Italy and Yugoslavia. In the whole Balkan peninsula Germany was compelled now to maintain about twenty-five Divisions, a number fully double that which she employed at the time of the Italian defection, and within six or seven weeks of the armistice Germany had been forced to send not less than thirty-five or forty Divisions from her main central mass of manœuvre to southern Europe. Because the Divisions didn't come directly from the Russian fighting line there was a tendency in Russia, and among those at home who were always anxious to find fault with our strategy, to suppose that the Italian campaign provided no distraction at all of German Divisions from the east. That, of course, was untrue. The Divisions that were brought down to the



south would otherwise have been available and would have been used as replacements on the eastern front.

Now follows a period of more than six months which must, I fear, be regarded as one of the less happy or successful phases in the long Mediterranean war. We were faced by a German line of defences stretching from sea to sea across Italy. The defences were of no excessive artificial strength, but they were organised in depth and the nature of the country militated heavily against the attacker. On the Eighth Army front in particular our men faced a depressing alternation of river and mountain ridge. They forced their way across each river, only to find the enemy holding the heights beyond in strength, and having forced these heights they found a further river position on the other side. And on that Adriatic coast there was no apparent goal. It was just a case of slogging forward from one position to another. As a British officer remarked to me in December, "In this country every five miles provides a fresh defensive position for a Division, every five hundred yards for a company."

Things were not much better on Fifth Army front. The tangle of mountains that close in the further north you get from Naples narrows down the profitable channels of attack to the area in the immediate neighbourhood of Highway Six, the road which runs from Naples through Cassino and Frosinone to Rome. The hills which flanked it on either side provided the most formidable mountain positions we had yet encountered, in the storming of which countless British and American lives appeared to be wantonly sacrificed without any corresponding gain.

Neither strategically nor tactically is the "direct approach," the head-on frontal assault, to be recommended if there is any reasonable hope of obtaining results by the "indirect" method. This had been amply demonstrated by Captain Liddell Hart in "The Way to Win Wars." Taking a large number of campaigns over a period of more than two thousand years, he shows that again and again success has been granted to the commander who sought the indirect approach to his object and has been denied to the general who was content with the frontal assault.

Yet in Italy throughout the winter we concentrated solely

upon a succession of just such direct frontal assaults. The one exception to this was the Anzio landing, imposed, so rumour had it, by political pressure upon the military. There was much to recommend this operation, but it fell down less because it was mistaken in conception than because it was executed with timidity, pusillanimity and excessive concentration upon safety first principles.

There is another aspect to be considered. Again and again I heard our military spokesman justify the winter campaign in Italy on the grounds that it constituted an effective subsidiary operation by pinning down the German Divisions. This was all very well up to a point, but the danger of such an operation always lies in the fact that a *subsidiary* operation, which aims at facilitating the ultimate goal of victory in some other theatre of war, may gradually develop into a *divergent* action which drains off one's own troops and supplies to a quite disproportionate extent.

It is worth while becoming a trifle theoretical at this point, because the whole justification or the reverse of our winter campaign depends upon a proper appreciation of those two terms "subsidiary" and "divergent."

By subsidiary operation I mean one which, on whatever scale it may be conceived or planned, is not a direct blow at the enemy's main fighting force or at the enemy's vitals, but one which contributes to this objective; that is its strategic justification. By a divergent action I mean one which drains away the resources of the attacker at a disproportionately greater rate than those of the defender. A subsidiary action contributes towards the central strategic goal, a divergent action distracts from it.

A certain amount of reading of military history will provide plenty of examples of either type of operation. I will select only one of each. Stonewall Jackson's Shenandoah Valley campaign in the spring and summer of 1862, though defensive in its nature, is an almost perfect example of the well-executed subsidiary action. McClellan, the commander-in-chief of the northern armies in the American Civil War, with a force of two hundred thousand men was advancing upon Richmond, the capital of the southern states. His flanks were adequately

protected, but Jackson with a force of three thousand men, flitting up and down the Shenandoah, prodding now here, now there, at the Federal outpost and flankguards, managed with this tiny force to paralyse the entire offensive operation of McClellan. Lincoln and the northern generals became nervous at this threat. They did not realise how small was General Jackson's force. And so the effective invasion of Virginia was first halted and then definitely called off.

That was a classic example of the correct employment of a subsidiary action to obtain great strategic ends.

As an example of an operation which, beginning as subsidiary, became divergent, there is perhaps no better case than the Dardanelles Expedition of 1915. The strategic conception was perfectly sound; one might say that it was brilliant. It began as a subsidiary action, subsidiary, that is to say, to the main front and the main enemy in the west. It aimed at knocking Turkey out of the war and securing a more direct line of supply to Russia. In that respect it would have been of real assistance to the operations in the west. The great munition flow to Russia would have enabled that Power to detain more German Divisions on the East front, which in turn would have relieved the strain in the west, and so on.

But the Dardanelles campaign failed. Neither by sea nor land was the break-through achieved. From being subsidiary it became divergent; we had failed to achieve our major objective, we were exhausting our own resources to a greater extent than those of the enemy, and we were beginning to regard the gaining of a certain amount of ground, certain so-called "key points" as aims in themselves, even though such points had long ceased to possess any real strategic significance.

The difficulty in operations of this nature lies always in discerning at what point a campaign passes from the realm of the subsidiary and legitimate to that of the divergent or unproductive action. There is always liable to be a time lag between the fact and its realisation by the commanders involved, and probably a still further time lag before this can be brought home to the Government or Governments responsible for the general strategic planning.

As the weeks passed I began to grow more and more disturbed by the development and implications of the military situation in Italy. I struck my first note of warning in an article to my newspaper written on October 25. Even at that date one was perfectly conscious of the slowing down of the tempo of the campaign. One felt disappointed that the opportunity of leap-frogging from southern Italy into the Balkans had not been taken and clearly was not now going to be taken. In the words of my colleague, Lieutenant-General Martin, Military Correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, who expressed his own disappointment at the time at the manner in which south-eastern Europe had been permitted to revert by default to the Germans, *Parturiunt montes, nascitur ridiculus kos*.

At intervals throughout the following months I continued to echo my own misgivings as I grimly noted the decreasing returns yielded by each successive offensive and the mounting toll of our losses. More and more it seemed that a law of diminishing return was applying, and more and more did I find it difficult to justify the continued lunges forward which produced so little.

Of course there was another side to it, which one began to appreciate when the break-through at last occurred in the following May. We *had* been pinning the Germans all the winter; we *had* gradually worn them down by our sledgehammer tactics. Our almost unchallenged supremacy in the air was having its effects; our increasingly heavy artillery bombardments were gradually bringing the enemy to realise the extent to which we surpassed him, and would progressively continue to surpass him, in equipment. And it did constitute a ceaseless distraction of his forces from Russia and from his build-up in the west.

We went through just the same doldrums in the middle reaches of the last war during the period from the Somme to Passchendaele, when our war of attrition and our head-on frontal assaults, so dear to the heart of Marshal Haig, seemed to be yielding so scanty and bloody a harvest. But you get the other side of the picture if you read Ludendorff's Memoirs. In that valuable and illuminating work you learn how sorely exercised the German Command was becoming as one attack followed

another, how they feared that each time the defensive had reached the very limits of its endurance. I remember that at the end of the last war Haig was at some pains to draw attention to the fact that the brilliant final successes of 1918 had only been rendered possible by the hard-fought and apparently fruitless attacks of 1916 and 1917. In the same way General Alexander summed up the progress of the Italian winter campaign to us as early as October 23.

"If the great offensive next year," he said, "proves the knock-out blow, then all these stomach punches which we are delivering down here are the process of getting the enemy to lower his guard and uncover his chin."

All that is true enough, but it doesn't meet the basic objection to the winter campaign. The plain fact of the matter is that, having developed a Mediterranean strategy for three years, a strategy which both defensively and offensively had been justified up to the hilt and had produced the most brilliant results, we now, when the full fruits were about to fall into our hands, abandoned this strategy of indirect approach and cut down the supplies of men and armament and shipping which, had they been sent to the Mediterranean during the autumn, would have enabled Eisenhower and Alexander to exploit their successes to the full. And, having taken that decision, which I believed then and believe now to be a mistaken one, we were yet constrained to continue our offensive in Italy on such margin of strength as remained.

The reason for this was, of course, political. As Mr. Churchill, in a burst of irritable candour told the House of Commons on one occasion, "We had to attack the Germans somewhere, unless we were to sit still and watch the Russians do all the fighting." That is true enough, but there were more profitable places in southern Europe in which to fight the Germans than the Italian peninsula.

But even accepting the strategical necessity of attacking in Italy, it is not easy to be happy about the tactical methods which we employed. Speaking very broadly, there are three general methods by which you may hope to defeat an enemy who is standing on the defensive in country that is favourable to him and not at all helpful to the attacker. You may produce some

entirely new weapon of war (as the tank and gas were produced in the last war), or some new combination of arms (e.g. the German combination of Panzer Division and dive-bomber in 1939-40). You may attempt an outflanking operation; either "horizontal" outflanking by seaborne landings, etc., or "vertical" outflanking by the use of paratroops. Thirdly, and this is least to be recommended, you may attempt to overhaul the enemy by firepower and produce a break-through in his front.

Even if we had possessed some new weapon in the autumn of 1943, it is most improbable that we should have employed it in what had now become, after all, only a secondary front. We should have reserved it for the grand assault of 1944. That ruled out Method One. But there was less excuse for ruling out Method Two so early. As it happened, having abandoned the solution of a coastal landing in the rear of the enemy, we then had belatedly to adopt it at Anzio, and then, because it failed at Anzio, to return to the frontal method.

By this time our methods of attack were becoming terribly stereotyped. There was the lengthy period of building up a superiority in every arm and ensuring that, whatever else happened the offensive would not fail for lack of supplies. Then came the preliminary artillery bombardment, sometimes heralded by, sometimes accompanied by, tactical air support. Then the infantry would go forward, more often than not making their first advance under cover of darkness, and the tanks would follow up to give them close fire support. Position One would be conquered and consolidated before Position Two was attacked.

In open country such methods may at any time produce a real break-through, particularly if the artillery and air bombardment is so powerful that it cuts a slice out of the opposing front and the tanks can go through relatively unopposed. In mountain country it is a very different matter. Such terrain is not appropriate for close tactical air support, and the guns have far less chance of pinpointing and destroying enemy batteries. Nor can you use your tanks with the same freedom; their advance is canalised along narrowly restricted routes which renders them peculiarly vulnerable to the anti-tank guns of the defender.

Yet we did lean heavily on artillery and air bombardment, and we did keep large numbers of tanks ready for the break-through which was never likely to occur.

I saw a classic example of the way in which these tactics can go wrong. It was about a week before Christmas on Eighth Army front. The Canadians were attacking beyond the Moro towards Ortona. The artillery bombardment had been as intense as anything I have heard. Now the theory of such bombardment is that, even if they do not kill as many men as you might expect, even if they do not blot out the machine-gun and mortar positions of the enemy, their intensity is so great that they render these gunners temporarily shell-shocked and so shaken that they are no longer in a position to man their guns effectively and will stagger out from their gun-pits and trenches, dazed and deafened, ready to surrender quite easily to the advancing infantry. That is what ought to happen.

But in this attack, which was typical of others during that winter, it just didn't work out like that. The enemy had merely burrowed down deeper in their forward positions than we had anticipated. When the barrage lifted and the Canadian infantry began to go forward, these machine-gunners, shaken but perfectly well able to fire their guns, emerged from their holes. The forward machine-gunners simply mowed down the advancing lines of Canadian infantry.

Where were the tanks? It was their task to give close fire support, and they were moving up behind the infantry. But in close, undulating country, thickly studded with trees, they lost touch. Sheering off to a flank they overran the enemy positions immediately opposed to them and made a good deal of ground. But they could not remain in position, because the infantry who should have been there to consolidate the ground which the tanks had won had all been killed. They had been killed by the German machine-gunners, who in their turn should have been killed by our artillery. And so, the tanks being out on a flank in an exposed position had to be drawn back. But as they withdrew diagonally across the enemy's front, they were raked by fire from the anti-tank guns which he had newly brought up, and suffered further losses.

It was almost a textbook case of the way in which carefully planned, methodical assault tactics can go wrong.

When all is said and done, I do feel that there was an excessive rigidity about our methods in all those winter battles. We seemed to be getting into a groove and to be becoming too closely tied to certain ways and weapons of assault, which had worked well enough in a different type of country and in different weather, but were now scarcely adequate. And we were becoming far too road-bound through excessive dependence upon lorry-borne supplies. The period of build-up was taking altogether too long. We were never so dependent upon supply as were the Americans, but then we, in our turn, compared most unfavourably with the Germans in this respect. Finally, to supply a little constructive criticism, one would have liked to have seen more mountain troops, infantry trained to move lightly equipped over difficult country and to take the maximum advantage of the natural cover provided by the terrain. We could not employ mountain troops because, apart from the Greeks languishing and squabbling in the Nile delta and in Syria, we had not got any mountain troops to speak of. And we had not got the mountain troops because it had not been possible for us to plan so far ahead as to take into account the fact that we might at some stage of the war be fighting in mountainous country. Our celebrated genius for improvisation had kept us far too busy meeting, often in a hand-to-mouth manner, the needs of the day instead of planning for those of the day after to-morrow.

Early on the morning of November 3 General Montgomery attacked across the Trigno, a small river flowing into the Adriatic some fifteen miles beyond Termoli. The Trigno was not a part of the German winter line, but was an outpost position in advance of it and it was never very likely that the Germans would try to defend it for long. The assault of the Eighth Army was to have been made some days earlier, but bad weather had postponed it and had taken away any chance of rushing the position. It was a skilfully-planned operation. The enemy's attention was diverted first by a limited attack by Fifth Division from the Campobasso area towards Isernia, and then by an



operation nearer the coast undertaken by a new formation, the Eighth Indian Division, which had recently been brought from Middle East.

The Trigno crossing, which was carried out by Seventy-Eighth Division, went very much according to plan, though there was a sharp counter-attack by German tanks against our infantry about a mile beyond the river at noon on the first day of the battle. After that enemy resistance relaxed and by the evening of November 7 they were back on the further side of the Sangro, twenty miles to the rear.

It was now that a possibility occurred of rushing the winter line at the Adriatic end before the Germans had got thoroughly into position. On November 9 our patrols, penetrating across the Sangro close to its mouth, found the position beyond the river deserted. The possibility of rushing the Sangro line was, I believe, discussed by General Montgomery and his Staff, but a decision was taken in favour of a methodical build-up for a full-scale assault. I do not consider that this represents one of the great lost opportunities of the war. It is possible that we might have forced the Sangro line some three weeks earlier than we did, but it is not easy to see that much benefit would have accrued as the result. We should have saved ourselves some casualties which we subsequently suffered, but that is about all. We might have gone forward as far as Pescara, but by this stage nothing that happened on the Adriatic coast could vitally affect the development of the campaign in Italy as a whole. The limitations of "rush tactics" were sufficiently exposed on the Fifth Army front during the same week that the battle of the Trigno was fought. American troops, pushing up Highway Six, got into the fortified zone of the winter line in the neighbourhood of Mignano. They were sharply counter-attacked and repulsed. The positions which they temporarily occupied had to be recaptured with heavy loss of life a month later.

Three weeks followed of preparation for the assault on the winter line. For the first time for months Italy passed out of the front page news. The immense battles going on in Russia, where the Germans were struggling desperately to cling on to the western Ukraine; the bombings of Berlin, now resumed on a scale that could hardly fail to make the most ruthless wince

at the contemplation of the quantity of human suffering crowded into a single tortured half-hour each night ; renewed growlings of discontent over the Dodecanese fiasco, for Leros was retaken by the Germans in the middle of November ; these were the significant developments of the month.

In Italy, pasteboard political crises were now temporarily the order of the day. The representatives of the six Democratic parties (Liberal, Christian Democrat, Action, Labour, Socialist and Communist) meeting at Naples, affirmed their lack of confidence in King Victor Emmanuel and the necessity for an abdication. So long as the king remained on the throne, they refused to take any part in the Government.

Naples had now become the headquarters of the democratic element in liberated Italy, just as Apulia, where Victor Emmanuel and Badoglio ruled without benefit of Amgot, was the centre of royalism for some months. Naples and Brindisi glowered at one another. The democrats achieved a certain degree of cohesion from the first by their common antipathy for Victor Emmanuel and the little clique of ex-Fascists, composed of such unsavoury personages as General Roatta (the worst type of the combination of military brutality with political time-serving and double-crossing) and General Ambrosio. They were agreed upon the necessity for a Government on a broad basis, representing all the non-Fascist parties, and they were prepared to accept as their leader the veteran Liberal statesman, Count Carlo Sforza.

Sforza is an able man and an attractive personality. This tall, dignified, elderly nobleman, who looks like General Smuts and who is one of the finest orators I have ever heard, owed his authority to a great extent to the fact that he was the most prominent statesman of pre-Fascist days in liberated Italy. (Two ex-Premiers, Orlando and Bonomi, were still living at that time in Rome.) Sforza had been Foreign Secretary in 1920 in the Government of the aged Liberal Prime Minister, Giolitti. Of the genuineness of his democratic sentiments there could never be any question. From the very first he had opposed the régime of Mussolini, and had gone into voluntary exile in France. Later he had gone to live in America and been generally regarded as the leader of the Italian anti-Fascists in that country.

Now, at the age of seventy, he symbolised continuity with the pre-Fascist days; he was a lone and dignified figure *d'outre tombe*.

The only other name of international reputation associated with the democratic party was that of the philosopher, Benedetto Croce, who at the age of eighty-six emerged from his Ivory Tower to lend the support of his name and prestige to the movement.

The democrats argued with cogency and force that to accept Victor Emmanuel would imply that they were associating themselves with a monarch who had for twenty years accepted the Fascist system without one single gesture of protest and who had with equal complaisance, signed the declaration of war upon his former allies, Britain and France. No healthy democratic Italy could be re-born under such auspices. Victor Emmanuel was simply the Darlan of Italy, a senile and decrepit figure who, after seeing his country dragged down to dishonour and defeat as the results of his own actions, or lack of them, was now endeavouring to cling with limpet-like determination to his throne.

There was not the same antagonism felt for Badoglio. It was realised that he had never been a member of the Fascist party, had carried out the military execution of its foreign policy without enthusiasm and had resigned his position of Chief of the General Staff rather than supervise the pursuance of the Greek adventure. There were those, Sforza included, who were perfectly ready to serve in a Government under Badoglio, but who could not stomach the king.

On the issue of the succession to Victor Emmanuel there was not the same unanimity of opinion. The majority probably favoured the establishment of a republic, but there were those who would have been prepared to accept another prince of the House of Savoy on the throne, either the infant Prince of Rome, grandson of the king, or the Duke of Aosta.

Badoglio's position, on the other side, was also clear enough. An old-fashioned Royalist of the type that we knew in England in the seventeenth century, but seldom since that date, and a soldier as distinct from a politician, Badoglio had accepted office, at the request of the king, after the fall of Mussolini,

and he was prepared to resign office—at the request of the king. He had no personal ambition, and less than no political ambition, but he had a genuine sense of duty as regards the necessity of nursing Italy back to health, and he was sincerely anxious to see Italian troops fighting alongside the British and Americans for the liberation of their country. It was an anxiety which was apt to prove a trifle embarrassing for the Allied Command.

Without the support of the British Government it is unlikely that Victor Emmanuel could have retained his throne. But the situation was in essentials closely akin to that which had developed in the past few years *vis-à-vis* the Greeks. In each country a sovereign who had tacitly supported a Fascist régime received a good deal of sympathy of one sort or another from influential elements in Britain, while the democratic and genuinely pro-British elements in the country were snubbed and ignored. It would not be fair to carry the parallel further than that, since King George of Greece had ruled over a country which was fighting the war in alliance with Britain and he had personally, both in good times and in bad, been consistently and unquestionably loyal to the British alliance.

Of King Victor Emmanuel the best that can be said is that, in the light of captured German documents which I have myself seen in Naples, his reluctance to enter the war in the spring of 1940 is believed to have caused Hitler some personal irritation. And he placed no obstacles in the way of Badoglio's negotiations for peace three years later.

The case for retaining the existing régime was based on the fact that the Allies ostentatiously sought to disinterest themselves in Italian politics as such. They required only a government that would maintain order behind their lines, ensure the maximum degree of co-operation and ultimately relieve them progressively of the responsibility for the administration of liberated Italy.

Rightly or wrongly, it was held that the Government which had actually negotiated the armistice, had handed over its fleet to the Allies and had subsequently co-operated to the best of its ability to fulfil the remaining terms of the armistice, was adequately qualified to remain in power. It was, at any rate, the *de jure* Government, and once we were to take it upon our-

selves to assist in the overthrow of a *de jure* Government it was not going to be easy to discover what would be the sanction for any succeeding administration or régime. There were those, also, who professed to doubt whether any Government formed on the basis of the Six Parties would enjoy either stability or authority in Italy.

All this was true enough, but it did not excuse the unfortunate and tactless references that were sometimes made in Britain to the democratic leaders. When they met in conference at Bari early in 1944 and demanded the abdication of the king, it was not helpful that the British Prime Minister should have stressed the fact in a speech that the democratic leaders who attended the Bari Conference had no Constitutional authority, and that there was no reason to believe that they were necessarily representative of Italy as a whole. Naturally, they had no technical Constitutional authority; how could they have? But they were closely in touch with representatives of the underground movements in northern Italy, and if anyone was justified in speaking for the country as a whole, they were justified.

A temporary compromise was reached in November. Badoglio stated publicly that he personally would resign as soon as the Allied forces reached Rome, and would make way for a Government which should be established on the broadest possible anti-Fascist basis. He had no desire himself to hold political power any longer after the liberation of Rome, but he was prepared to devote himself, if his services were required, to the prosecution of the war against Germany. The whole question of the régime to be adopted in Italy would then be re-submitted, but until the entry into Rome King Victor Emmanuel would remain upon the throne.

This may have been the best compromise that could have been arrived at under the circumstances at the time. But it settled nothing. All that was decided was that the main issues at stake should be postponed. "We will make no decision upon this difficult question now. Some little time hence we will all meet in Rome and talk about it again." That, in effect, was what the compromise amounted to.

Nor was there any particular reason to suppose that the solution of the problem would become any easier when Rome

had been reached. For Rome is not Italy, and the political atmosphere of Rome would not necessarily give the key to the feelings of the cities of the north, which contained so large a proportion of the population of Italy. Numerous political leaders, long in obscurity or in hiding, would emerge as the flood receded. Antiquated Liberals with memories reaching back to the days when Giolitti made Italian politicians dance through all the motions of democratic Government like a series of marionettes; Communists, whose memories stretched back no further than October, 1917; youthful members of the Action party, with any amount of enthusiasm but no political experience. Undoubtedly a plethora of leaders or would-be leaders would discover themselves in Rome. But what of the followers? Very little progress would have been made towards discovering the real will of the people. Not until Milan and Turin were reached could that be discovered with any degree of certainty.

In November this compromise was all very well, for it was still reasonable at that time to hope that Rome might be liberated by the end of January. But as the weeks and months passed by and the march upon Rome first slackened and then came to a standstill it became clear that the compromise required some modification. For it seemed that the grip of the king was tightening with a corpse-like rigidity upon the throne, and week after week Sforza and Croce addressed public meetings in Naples and the surrounding districts amid a clamorous insistence upon the abdication of Victor Emmanuel and the *démission* of the House of Savoy. The Government of Badoglio, composed, apart from the Marshal himself, of obscure and colourless bureaucrats was—it became more and more apparent—completely out of touch with the sentiments of that part of Italy which was free from German control. Although Victor Emmanuel might refuse to accept the demand for his abdication voiced by what his supporters described as “a camarilla of Naples politicians,” yet the tide was running too strongly, and some modification was clearly necessary. Among the Six Parties the centre of gravity was showing a tendency to shift further to the Left, from Sforza and Croce towards the Socialists and Communists. Finally, at the beginning of April, the king undertook to withdraw into the background in all but name, and

representatives of all the Six Parties entered a broadened Cabinet under Badoglio for the purpose of ensuring a more vigorous and whole-hearted prosecution of the war.

But meanwhile the people of Italy had experienced a winter of profound discontent and disorientation. The country was artificially bisected, where hostile armies faced one another amid a broad belt of shattered towns and villages which stretched from sea to sea across the peninsula. Prices were rising steadily, there was a total absence of employment in some trades and an artificial, unreal prosperity in others; the equitable distribution of food was still not easy to achieve (though improvements were made in the course of the winter through the efforts of Amgot and the Allied Control Commission); and a Black Market of enormous vitality flourished in Naples and in all the larger towns. The nation lacked any real focus and leadership, and no man knew what the future would bring.

## XV. The Road to Cassino : The Road to Ortona

ON November 28 the attack upon the German winter line began.

It began with an attack by Eighth Army against the line of the Sangro. Then on December 1, Fifth Army went into action against the mountain heights of Monte Camino and Sambucaro which dominated Route Six and blocked the road towards Cassino. In the course of the succeeding days of very hard fighting under desperately unfavourable conditions both Armies breached the winter line. They broke through the winter line, and it made virtually no difference at all.

That was the profound tragedy of that December assault, from which the public had been led to expect fuller and more decisive results than the circumstances permitted. There had been an impression, which I am afraid was encouraged in military circles, that once through the winter line our forces

would go cracking ahead and that Rome was not very far over the horizon. This was misleading. The tactical planning of the offensive of both fronts was extremely skilful, our troops showed a courage and endurance which surpassed anything I had previously witnessed in war, but the requisites for decisive success did not exist.

They did not exist for three reasons. First of all because the winter line was not a winter line. That was one of the unfortunate and deceptive phrases that were employed at that time. A *line* suggests something that can be pierced and, by implication, offers opportunities of exploitation when it is pierced. But the winter line was in reality a succession of river and mountain positions defended in depth. Our men battled across the Sangro, but behind the Sangro was the Moro, and behind the Moro was the Foro, and behind the Foro was the Pescara. And when you had got to the Pescara, where were you ?

It was the same on the Fifth Army front. The tedious process of storming one mountain crest merely revealed the fact that another lay beyond ; no sooner was one fortified hill-side village taken by storm than another reared its head beyond.

Secondly, there was our old friend the weather to contend with. Unfavourable weather handicaps all military operations, but, as I have said before, it handicaps the attacker far more severely than the defender. Mud is not just a nuisance ; it is a positive antagonist in battle. It blocks roads and holds up the movements of transport, and the constriction and congestion of military transport and supplies affects a modern mechanised army like the clogging of the respiratory channels of the human body. But, above all, cloud and rain render it difficult for the attacker to employ his air strength effectively. And it was in the air arm that we possessed our greatest relative superiority to the enemy.

And, lastly, we had not enough troops. That was not quite so apparent at the time as it has since become. We counted upon our immense artillery bombardments to blast a way through, and after that . . . well, there were always the tanks. But what we needed was more infantry. If at the end of the first week's fighting we had been able to produce an entirely



fresh Division on both Fifth and Eighth Army fronts, to throw into the breached positions in much the way that Seventy-Eighth Division had been thrown in at Centuripe in August, then perhaps a real break-through might have been achieved. I doubt it, because I find it difficult to believe that, with the limited supply routes at our disposal, it would have been easy or possible to move a fresh Division swiftly forward on either front. I had some experience of waiting in traffic blocks on the main roads during those days; I know how easily such blocks can occur, and I have seen what happens when two convoys, moving along converging roads, arrive simultaneously at a cross-roads with each convoy leader firmly convinced that his own trucks have absolute right of priority. Eighth Army had only one axis of supply—the coastal road along the Adriatic—and Fifth Army was not much better situated.

And so the winter line battle was opened without any real prospects of obtaining more than purely local successes, and therefore its significance is to be judged in terms of human courage and endurance, not in terms of strategic achievement.

The Fifth Army plan was quite ingenious. The British Tenth Corps was to open the ball with a blow at Monte Camino, the mountain bastion south of Highway Six, two or three days later the American Second Corps would go into action against Sambucaro, the corresponding bastion to the north of the road. When these had been cleared—a process which, it was estimated, would take about ten days to accomplish—the armour would go through the centre into the plains beyond. It was difficult to see how they could expect to get farther than Cassino and the line of the Rapido, where a further defensive position was already known to exist, but the statements of the military spokesman at Fifth Army headquarters that the offensive should take us, if not to Rome, at any rate “a hell of a lot nearer” to the capital, seemed to indicate more extensive hopes on the part of the Army, or Army Group Command.

The British attacked and took Monte Camino, but they had to fight desperately in vile weather all the way up the slopes, and it was a week before the last Germans, who clung grimly on to a monastery near the summit, were finally overwhelmed. And by that time our forces were too exhausted and too depleted

to be in a position to exploit the success. Metaphorically speaking, we were able to do no more than stagger to the top of the mountain and lie gasping on the summit.

A week after the British, the American attack opened north of the highway. They found it very tough going. The little village of San Pietro again and again foiled their assaults. In order to approach it you have to crest a shoulder of hill less than a mile from the village, and the German machine-gunners around San Pietro raked the exposed slope on the nearer side with their fire. By dogged persistence, and blanketing the German forward positions with shell-fire, the Americans fought their way during January successively through the villages of San Pietro, San Vittore and Cervaro, and the Germans dropped back into their prepared positions behind the Rapido and in the town of Cassino.

To herald the offensive there were just two lovely clear blue days, warm and mild, of the sort that you get in Italy intermittently all through the winter. On such days the landscape takes on a new beauty. There is none of the hard, pitiless summer glare of the Mediterranean, the sky has an unfamiliar quality of softness, against which the grey, forbidding-looking mountains, peaked with snow, stand out in powerful silhouette. There is a quality of indefiniteness about the smudgy white walls of the houses and farm buildings and the rust-red roofs. A bluish-grey mist, the legacy of recent rains, rises stealthily from the river valleys. If you could forget that the monstrous, slowly-dissolving white flowers of smoke are shell-bursts and that each of them may mean, is intended to mean, that men are dying at that moment, then there would be little to disturb the perfect serenity of the day.

It didn't last. The weather broke, and during the days that followed the infantry struggled forward under leaden-coloured skies from which the rain poured down with monotonous, unvarying persistence. Each night the infantry slogged forward through the darkness and rain, and each day they lay miserably huddled in whatever improvised shelter they could discover on a hillside whose lack of natural cover had earned it the name of Bareback Ridge.

The guns had done their job beforehand, selecting targets

for elimination, now here, now there. Monastery Hill, the highest peak of Monte Camino, received five thousand shells in little more than five minutes, and you can hardly ask for better than that. But it is impossible in mountain country to blot out enemy batteries or machine-gun positions with the same degree of certainty which you can achieve in a broad, open desert or plain. The infantry have got to go forward sooner or later, and the man with the rifle and hand-grenade becomes the final arbiter of battle. It's strange to recall that not so very long ago there was a tendency to regard infantry as a largely obsolete arm and to suppose that the battles of the future would be contested almost solely by head-on collisions of tanks in the manner of the great days of naval warfare. Nowadays the infantryman is more important than ever; he has to be a Jack-of-all-trades and requires a far higher degree of training than was necessary in the last war, when his rôle was mainly to stand in a muddy trench and shoot or be shot.

Up the hill the infantry went on that first night of the attack, climbing the steep mountain paths in single file and following the lines of tape which were laid out by the leading man in each file. It was December, and a December night in the mountains is not warm. But the men were not able to wear their great-coats, for they needed to travel light going up those slopes. Rifle, cartridges, hand-grenades and iron rations were all that they were able to take. They wore their waterproof gas capes as protection against the rain.

Each platoon worked its way on up the slopes where often it was a case of slinging one's rifle over one's back and climbing on hands and knees. German machine-gun fire would spit out at them intermittently and German Verey lights and flares would seek to discover the precise location. And then in the darkness the grimmest part of the nightmare would begin—the close-quarters rushing of the German machine-gun positions. In theory, all or most of these should have been blotted out by our own artillery; in practice, machine-gunners seemed to bear charmed lives—or to possess mysterious powers of self-reproduction. The infantry always had to finish the job, and they had no hope of doing so with success except at night. For at night it is possible, particularly in broken country, to work in

close and then to demolish the hostile machine-gun positions with grenades.

It is possible, but it is liable to be extremely costly, and your chances of living, if you get severely wounded in attacking one of these isolated mountain positions, are not very great. For it is difficult to bring the wounded off either by night or day, it is difficult even to get stretcher-bearers up to them.

Daytime is not necessarily either less dangerous or less generally unpleasant than night in a mountain operation of this nature. The infantry are not expected to go forward, but they have to hold their positions, and sometimes the chances and accidents of the night fighting have left small advance parties, the jetsam of the operation, no more than fifty or a hundred yards from the nearest enemy position. Under such circumstances a soldier must merely be content to hope that the luck of the ground will favour him. As he has had to climb with the barest minimum of equipment, he has no entrenching tools, and even if he had it would seldom be possible to use them on rocky mountain slopes. And so he lies exposed to wind and rain or frost all through the day, moving as little as possible and longing for nightfall when he may be relieved by fresh troops or, at the worst, may be able to stretch and exercise his numbed limbs in a further advance.

To keep the forward troops supplied under such conditions is nearly half the battle. It is no good having your men pushed far forward if they run out of ammunition or run out of food. On Monte Camino there was only a single narrow, crazily-winding path by which to supply our infantry. Every mule that could be rounded up was brought to the foot of the mountain, but there were not enough mules for our needs—there never are in mountain fighting. And you couldn't get even mules up some of the steepest bits. That was a job that could only be done by men.

Up that steep and slippery path they went in the driving rain, carrying overcoats and blankets, ammunition-boxes and forty-pound ration-boxes on their shoulders. The mud through which they tramped was of the colour and about the consistency of liquid milk chocolate. Every time a carrier put his foot forward it sank in ankle deep. Each separate step was a con-

sidered and independent motion that seemed to bear no particular relation to the step that had preceded it, for you had to make sure of each foothold before venturing on the next. The carriers do not waste their breath unnecessarily, they need it far too urgently. But I did once during those days hear a familiar half-humorous cockney grumble, "Reckon it's a pity I wasn't born an 'orse." And my mind slid back along a corridor of memory to that historic night on board *Strathnaver*, when we were about to embark for Sicily in the small open landing craft that were to carry us over the last miles of our voyage. I remembered that cheery final exhortation: "Nah then, Bert, remember what your muvver told you, and don't get your feet wet."

Down the mountain path there came another file of men. When they met the supply parties the latter stood aside or climbed up on to the rocks to let them pass. For these were the stretcher-bearers bringing off the wounded from the hill, and it is the rule of the road in mountain warfare that the men who are ascending have the right of way except when they meet stretcher-bearers.

It was less tiring, but more tricky, going downhill in the rain and mist and mud, and I noticed that there were four bearers to each stretcher. It was necessary.

Here and there came the walking wounded, pallid, hollow-eyed and unshaven, mostly streaked with blood about the head and face.

The mist had closed down once more upon the summit of Camino as I made my way circumspectly down along the slope known as Bareback Ridge. I was returning to a bed under a roof, a warm meal and a log fire; for I had found an unusually comfortable billet in the castle of Sessa Aurunca, whose thick, strongly-built walls were an ample protection against the winter cold. After dinner, when we had written our despatches, we should play bridge, and perhaps we should discover that one or other of us had the butt-end of a bottle of whisky.

But on Monte Camino the fighting men lay exposed to another night of bitter chill, shrouded by the mist not merely from those below, but even from the sight of one another. It was December, and the night would be very long and very cold.

And down on the lower slopes, faintly etched against the hillside, dark, slowly-moving specks were working their way forward—the heavily-laden carriers who were stumbling uphill into the mist and darkness.

To return to Naples from Monte Camino was like stepping from the atmosphere of a street accident directly into a crude and noisy cabaret. Christmas was at hand. Naples' shops were fuller than ever—fuller of goods and fuller of customers. There were more Black Market restaurants than ever. The San Carlo Opera House was about to re-open, and meanwhile you could see opera at Fifth Army headquarters at the Royal Palace of Caserta. In the twelve hundred rooms which that immense baroque pile contains there was plenty of room for an opera house, a ballroom and more departmental offices than any army headquarters has possessed since the beginning of time. Caserta is not, to my mind, among the most lovely specimens of Baroque, but perhaps I was prejudiced by the fact that I scarcely ever saw it save under grey, lowering skies, and that the brown fever of irrelevant khaki which had sprouted from courtyard to roof was a depressing substitute for the powdered heads, the fans, and panniers to which it properly belonged.

There seemed to be more troops than ever in Naples. Some of them, of course, were on leave, but the majority were apparently stationed in or around the town and many were engaged upon the work of reconditioning the city. With many of the public utilities now functioning, Naples was a very pleasant place if you had money in your pockets to spend. The Via Roma, which is about as narrow as Bond Street, was so packed with shoppers and *boulevardiers* that it was almost impossible to get along without being physically jostled off the pavement. At the two harbourside restaurants, the Bersagliera and the Zit Theresa, you could still get a very good meal, though the food was not quite so good and the price was considerably higher than it had been in October. You would normally be able to get a thick minestrone, fish, chicken or quite frequently beef-steak and dessert. With wine this would cost from 140 to 220 lire, which at the depreciated rate of exchange meant from seven shillings to eleven shillings, or from one and a half

to two and a half dollars. But for the unfortunate Italian civilian that would have meant the equivalent of from thirty shillings to fifty shillings. The result was that such restaurants came to depend wholly upon an Anglo-American military clientele.

There was a great deal of complaint about the prices which were being charged by Neapolitan shopkeepers and restaurateurs, and *Union Jack*, the daily newspaper of the British forces in Italy, ran a vigorous campaign against the flagrant profiteering that was going on. Of course, British and American soldiers were swindled, but it was to some extent their own fault for paying the inflated prices that were demanded. And the attack didn't touch the real core of the problem, at any rate so far as food was concerned. Maximum prices had been rigidly fixed for the sale of food and other staple commodities. British and American soldiers were urged in their daily newspapers to pay no more than these maximum prices. But it just wasn't an economic proposition, given the extreme difficulty which the retailer faced in obtaining food. He couldn't rely upon a punctual and regular supply from the provinces. He had to fix up his own necessarily makeshift arrangements in the matter of transport, which involved the employment of a middleman, who in turn required his rake-off. It was this lack of transport for non-essential civilian requirements, and the fact that priority on roads and railways had necessarily to be reserved for Allied troop and transport movements, that kept the prices high. It was a matter of economics.

There was a case, of course, for forbidding the purchase of food at hotels, restaurants or shops by members of the Allied forces. This had been done in Brindisi and in Lecce, but it was not, on the whole, a measure to be recommended in Naples. The soldier returning on leave from the chilly discomforts of forward positions naturally looked forward to the opportunity of relaxation in Naples. It wasn't like returning home, but at least it was reasonable to expect that the city would provide him with some of the amenities which Cairo had so adequately supplied to the desert-weary troops of the Eighth Army in the past. And the pleasures of the table are among the few which the soldier on short local leave is able to enjoy.

Anyhow, Naples was beginning to be an excessively gay

place in mid-December. There was all the spurious brightness which you find whenever there is a rapid turnover of money. There was a general atmosphere of jolliness. The romantically-minded were arranging for dances in the mess and sending out invitations to the numerous nurses and members of women's quasi-military organisations who had now arrived in some quantities in Naples; the bad boys were bringing out their baccarat. There was plenty of fun to be had if you could forget Monte Camino. Some friends of mine had "acquired" a flat. It was the best flat in the best block on the sea front of Naples. I am convinced that it was the best flat in the whole of Naples, and the unit showed their appreciation of it by clinging on like a limpet after my friends departed.

Quite suddenly I realised that I couldn't stand it a day longer. There was a prospect of parties and festivities every day of the week . . . and my blood ran chill. I reacted abruptly and violently against all this gaiety. I seek neither to explain nor justify this unexpected puritanical revulsion. I call attention to it not because I think that my own psychological reactions are of any particular importance, but because it is reasonable to assume that they are likely to be those of Everyman at certain times and under certain conditions. I am told that Mr. J. B. Priestley has been very angry with war correspondents for talking so much about themselves, but after all that is, in part, a war correspondent's job. It is his job to report and interpret the war, and interpretation, in its widest sense, involves at times an attempt to study the individual reaction in the presence of war. And unless one is a *very* good psychologist the only individual of whose reactions one can speak with assurance is oneself.

And so I fled incontinently from Naples, making the decision between evening and dawn, "between the stirrup and the ground," after one particularly jolly party. I felt rather like Christian fleeing from the City of Destruction, and then I changed my mind and decided I was merely an unsocial freak. Anyhow, between breakfast and supper-time I crossed Italy from sea to sea, and was back with my old friends of the Eighth Army on the bleak, cheerless, but infinitely more sympathetic, Adriatic coast.



The battle of the Sangro had been fought and won while the action against Monte Camino was in progress. It was an efficient and workmanlike operation, like every battle planned by General Montgomery or executed by Seventy-Eighth Division. The Sangro position was forced by a feint attack on one flank which masked the real assault in great strength of the other. But it was the most sterile of all Montgomery's victories. It led nowhere. After storming their way over the Sangro our troops had to fight again just as hard to force a bridgehead over the Moro, a few miles farther on, and then they were involved in the bitterest fighting of all, street by street, through the town of Ortona. And after Ortona the offensive died away from sheer inanity.

As a counterpart to the grim struggle of endurance of Monte Camino should be set the grim struggle of endurance in the streets of Ortona. Just as the Volturno was the first and therefore the prototype river battle in which British troops had to take part, and Monte Camino was the prototype of all mountain attacks (and I am not forgetting Longstop or Centuripe), so Ortona was the first and the prototype of the street battle which continues for days inside a town. Later we were to encounter the same thing on an even more desperate and intensified scale at Cassino. But it is Ortona that remains in my mind as the prototype, perhaps because it was possible to get so close to the actual fighting inside the town. You could visit and chat with troops and civilians in one part of Ortona while the other part was still firmly held by the German defenders. And Ortona is not a large town; it is, I should estimate, a shade smaller than Swanage.

The Germans had shown an extraordinary tenacity in their resistance to our attacks on this front throughout December. They contested every defensible position in the twenty odd miles that divides the Sangro from Ortona. And when they were forced back they returned again with renewed vigour in a succession of counter-attacks. They were prepared, as they had not been earlier in the campaign, to throw away troops lavishly in order to hold us or to regain ground which they had lost. When the Sixty-Fifth, never a very good Division, failed to hold us on the Moro, the reconstituted Nineteenth Light Division, heirs to a famous tradition in Africa, were

flung into the line in their place. They counter-attacked again and again with great courage, but played right into our hands by doing so, and suffered very severe losses in the process. Finally, for the fighting in Ortona itself the enemy produced the First Parachute Division, as fine a unit as any that has fought on either side in Italy.

To this day I do not know why the Germans fought so hard or permitted themselves such losses in what was, after all, only a subsidiary sector where no decisive result could be obtained. It is possible that they had been foxed by Montgomery's Order of the Day to his army at the opening of the Sangro battle. The Order, with its undertaking to inflict a "colossal crack" upon the enemy, may have been intentionally designed to persuade the enemy to concentrate in greater force in defence of the less vulnerable and less significant flank. I have since learned that this was not the case. There had been hopes of exploiting up through the central Appenines from Pescara.

Anyhow, they fought bitterly all the way back to Ortona, as though they were fighting with their backs to the wall to stave off an imminent and decisive break-through.

Ortona was a Christmas battle. The Canadians, who had now been brought into the line on the coast to relieve Seventy-Eighth Division, broke into the town on the evening of Monday, December 20. They fought in the town all through that week. They fought all through Christmas Day. The last remnants of German resistance were finally cleaned up only on the morning of Tuesday, December 28. And for hours and days afterwards Canadians continued to be killed as the result of the mines and booby-traps that had been left in the houses.

As soon as I heard that the Canadians had entered Ortona I drove off from Army Headquarters in the direction of the town. I was travelling in a jeep with my old friend John Soboleff, who had led the party which travelled from the Eighth to the Fifth Army in No Man's Land in September. To go out for the day with John was like taking part in a foray beside some genial, large-hearted Border Baron. I repeat that John did not loot, but things had a way of falling into his hands. He knew what he intended to get before he set out, and somehow or other he always got it. He would exclaim, as he climbed into his jeep, "Christopher, to-day we get sheep!"

or "To-day I know where we get good wine." And we did.

As one approaches Ortona one crosses a heath so blasted, so barren in its atmosphere of shell-torn desolation, the few trees mere splintered husks, the half-dozen houses visible both uninhabited and uninhabitable, that, under that grey lowering sky, I would scarcely have been surprised had Macbeth's three witches (why do stage productions always represent them as superannuated charwomen?) emerged cackling from the ruins. A deep but narrow depression which we crossed, where the corpses of German soldiers were lying as yet unburied, already bore among our troops the sinister name of Dead Man's Gulch.

Yet amid all that desolation we were astonished to see a small flock of sheep browsing by the roadside in the neighbourhood of a half-ruined cottage.

John's eyes lit up.

"Sheep!" he exclaimed, and I knew what he meant.

We got out of the jeep, the three of us—John Soboleff, Cyril Ray of the *Manchester Guardian*, and myself—and moved off in the direction of the flock. We were preparing to begin manoeuvres for heading one of them off when it occurred to Ray and myself that it might be as well to make sure that the sheep were ownerless. It was very probable, as the cottage, which was little more than a one-room hovel, bore the unmistakable look of desertion and no smoke was rising from its chimney although it was a bitter, grey, cold day.

We entered the cottage.

The single room was half darkened, and we could not at first distinguish any figures at all clearly. Then we saw them.

Swaying backwards and forwards in her chair, an old woman, her eyes closed, her face the colour of old parchment, was moaning and keening to herself. She must have been barely conscious, for she did not notice our entry.

Stretched out on the floor lay the corpses of four young children. There was nothing else in the room.

We looked at one another. Then we stole quietly from the room.

We debated what we should do about the old woman. She was clearly three-quarters dead, but we couldn't leave her like

that. Ultimately we decided to keep an eye open for the nearest ambulance unit and to inform them. Fortunately we caught up with one in less than ten minutes, and they sent a couple of men back to collect the old woman and see what could be done about her.

We were now close upon the outskirts of Ortona. An American ambulance was drawn up beside the gateway of a largish, well-built house, and a small group of civilians was clustered around it. Against the sombre backcloth of that scarred and battered countryside, against the drab and muddy uniforms of the soldiers and the strictly utilitarian nature of the vehicles that were passing down the road, these figures struck a note of alien elegance. There were a couple of women in fur coats with highly lacquered faces and neatly manicured hands, and one of the men had a flower in his buttonhole. But they were standing around stretchers, for the house in which they had been living had come under German shell-fire during the previous night, and now the American ambulance men were carrying out the dead and dying and bringing their relatives back to the security of towns far in the rear of our lines. They were prosperous citizens of Ortona who had migrated to this house beyond the town for greater safety, but war makes no distinction between town and village, mansion or farmhouse.

A figure detached himself from the group and came towards us. He was an elderly man, and he spoke English grammatically but with a curious accent that was not Italian.

John cocked an interested eye towards him.

"Russian?" the man queried.

"I, also!" exclaimed John. And then the two went at it hammer and tongs, Slav yammering rapidly and affectionately at Slav.

Subsequently John told us his story. The Russian was a native of Nikolaev. He had lived for some years in Italy, and on account of his age had escaped internment when Italy went to war with Russia. During the past few days, however, he had taken into his house and concealed four escaped British prisoners from the Sulmona camp, and had subsequently passed them through the German lines to safety. He was now making

his way on foot to discover the nearest British headquarters since he had information of value to impart.

In the strange, tragic borderland where Nazi-controlled and free Europe meet, these colourful, improbable characters do tend to turn up with the most astonishing frequency, and I should never be surprised to encounter a Ruthenian Social Democrat leader or a Manchukuo Irredentist in any country lane among the Apennines. But to hear two Russians chattering to one another in the middle of an Italian high-road, oblivious of the hooting of impatient lorry drivers at their backs ("Time's wingéd chariots hurrying near") is the type of experience which one is not frequently granted.

You couldn't get into Ortona by the main road. The enemy had it covered by hidden machine-gun nests, and the one or two trucks that attempted to rush it were forced to turn back precipitately. But further round towards the sea Canadian troops had entered the town from another direction and were now fighting their way through, street by street. Each street was tackled in turn. It had to be cleared first by the infantry with rifle and hand-grenade. In the event of the infantry striking a machine-gun nest ("Maggie" in the vernacular) or some other obstacle that defied the customary methods of "winkling out," then the Sherman tanks and six-pounder anti-tank guns, which were upon the heels of the infantry giving close fire support, would be called into play, while the infantry themselves went to ground, taking whatever cover the shattered houses might afford them.

From the town came an intermittent clatter of small-arms' fire, but now and then the battle would fall strangely silent for no immediately obvious reason. There is something terrible about this stillness in the very centre of the storm which I have noted so frequently on battlefields. There is a very horrible and uncanny quality about it, just because all the natural sounds that one connects with the neighbourhood of human habitations are so tragically absent. I am not sure that this sudden and inhuman hush is not the most awe-inspiring thing about a modern battlefield. For it is like the passing of the angel of death.

I accompanied one of the Canadian patrols into the town.

The process of occupying an "inhabited locality" in which hostile forces are still operating involves a number of strangely rhythmic movements of small groups, movements suggestive in their careful precision of some macabre ballet. Stealthily, we begin to go forward, in single file and at well-spaced intervals down the street, taking full advantage of the cover afforded by the doorways of the houses. At each transverse road we quicken up our step and then dart rapidly across before the possible enemy sniper can mark one down. As we pass, nervous figures—timorous old women, gaunt, quivering old men—peer hesitantly from the doorways.

It was a strange indication of the necessary interlacing of military and civilian life. One doorway would conceal a Canadian soldier; from the next an old man or a child would tentatively emerge; then another soldier; and so on. There was one point where the accident of a ruined house left a clear field of fire for an enemy sniper. I noted how the Canadian soldiers, lithe as panthers, darted past this spot. Then an old woman emerged from one of the houses. On some business of her own—Heaven knows what!—she elected to follow down the street. One could see her imitating, almost parodying, the exact motions of the soldiers who had gone before, as she endeavoured to dart with their alert precision from one doorway to the next. Then at the gap she gathered up her skirts and scuttled across the tumbled masonry. In less tragic circumstances her ungainly motions might have tempted laughter, but in shattered Ortona, among the corpses and the machine-guns, their very grotesquerie suggested the macabre horror of a dance of death.

Not infrequently, as the sombre tapestry of war unrolls, one encounters a spectacle so improbably melodramatic that one can do no more than report it while apologising for its lurid banality. We had reached the principal church of Ortona. Its lofty tower had served as an admirable observation post for the enemy who had commanded the most complete view of our movements towards the town. Several German soldiers had been killed in the neighbourhood. Outside the east door lay one of them, sprawled untidily in the horrible convulsion of death. A packet of postcards had fallen from the pocket

of his tunic and now lay scattered in the roadway. Each postcard was smeared and dabbled with fresh blood. And the portrait on every postcard was that of Adolf Hitler.

What strikes one so forcibly about the entry of troops into a hostile town is the extraordinary melodramatic character of the scene. I remember in Tunis, the day that we entered and ran slap into an ambush, that as I lay flat in the road while German machine-gun bullets pinged against the wall above my head I was saying to myself, "This isn't real! It's cinema! It's purest Hollywood." And I felt obscurely glad that the reality of war did so faithfully reflect its interpretation in celluloid. It was so nice to feel that Mr. Cecil B. de Mille was justified in all his children.

And in just the same way, the Canadians moving, steel-helmeted and with fixed bayonets, stealthily through the shattered and treacherous streets looked so much more like the Hollywood version of war than the real thing. And, thank God, none of them were getting killed just at that moment. And as for the blood-stained postcards of the Führer—would any war novelist dare to indulge in symbolism so ponderous?

Section by section the town was being cleaned up by the Canadian infantry and gunners. One would hear the crisp word of command:

"There are a couple of snipers over there. We've got to deal with them. You will get covering fire from those windows up on our left flank. Get ahead with it."

That was all. But a section would move off with rifles and hand-grenades. And the rattle of fire would break out once more with a greater intensity than before. Or it would cease abruptly.

We learned a great deal about street fighting during those nine days in which we fought through Ortona. We learned that in actions of this nature the attackers, even when they possess considerable superiority of fire power, are likely to suffer losses probably more severe than those of the defenders. Every house is liable to prove a death-trap, every street corner an ambush. And the losses are not confined to the period of actual fighting in the town. As the Germans withdrew from the northern fringe they left each building mined, the mine being

touched off with a connecting wire when troops of our leading sections were estimated to have entered the building. This pleasing refinement of war serves a double purpose. It renders the occupation of each separate house a hazardous and probably a costly business. At the same time the collapse of more and more buildings renders the whole town a ghastly inferno of rubble which, when the defenders are finally driven out, inevitably delays the progress of the wheeled or tracked vehicles which might be employed to speed the pursuit.

The Germans used flame-throwers as a defensive weapon against both tanks and infantry in the narrow streets of Ortona. Having a range of no more than sixty yards these are of course of little value in open fighting and for that reason are seldom employed, but for close-range work of this sort they were perfectly suited, and the Germans claimed to have knocked out several tanks with them. We employed for the fighting in Ortona Shermans in close support of the infantry, and six-pounder anti-tank guns which were used to fire slap through the wall of those houses which were known to conceal nests of German gunners. But it is slow work demolishing a town house by house.

A quick undignified scuttle across a street "subject to sniping" brought me to our most forward position in the town. I dived through a doorway and down a couple of steps and found myself in the living-room of an Italian family. What a strange clutter of humanity it was. There were some five or six Canadian soldiers, there were old women and there were children innumerable. A painter of genius—Goya, perhaps—might have done justice to the scene. I felt that no verbal description could do so. In the half-darkened room the *pasta* for the midday meal was simmering over the fire in the corner. Haggard, prematurely aged women kept emerging shyly one after another from some inner chamber where an old man, the grandfather of the numerous children, was dying; he had been hit by a shell splinter and, lacking medical attention, the wound had gangrened. Another old man was uttering maledictions against Mussolini. Then his wife surprisingly produced a jeroboam of Marsala and half a dozen glasses and moved around among the soldiers, filling and re-filling their glasses. Marsala



in the front line ; how crazy it all was ! (It was good Marsala, too.) The children clambered around the Canadian soldiers and clutched at them convulsively every time one of our anti-tank guns, located only half a dozen paces from the door of the house, fired down the street in the direction of one of the remaining German machine-gun posts. Soon each one of us had a squirming, terrified child in his arms. And the old lady went on distributing Marsala.

These people were astonishingly cheerful. They were in the front line, as much as it is humanly possible for civilians to be in the front line. The danger was not inconsiderable and—owing to the nearness of our own guns—sounded much greater than it actually was. Out of that medley of human beings, flung together for a brief half-hour, there developed a singular community of feeling and a singular sense of fellowship. As always in the very front line you encounter more real charity and unselfishness, whether among soldiers or civilians, than you are likely to find further back among the relentless *embusqués* at base. How we used to gibe a dozen years ago at the old cant phrase about war “bringing the best out of a man,” inquiring with pertinent irony whether the “best” that came out was a man’s guts as he lay shattered and bleeding from some ghastly abdominal wound that would not let him die. How right we were ; and yet, how right *they* were, too. If you want to find Christianity and human brotherhood, I can tell you exactly where to go to find it. You had better give a miss to “choirs and places where they sing” ; you need not hang about too long with the philanthropic societies ; just take a jeep and drive as far forward as you can towards the front line of any war that catches your fancy (you will always find a war somewhere).

In the houses of Ortona, which they had been shelling for days, our soldiers were welcome as if each one of them was a new Messiah, bringing peace and security. And the soldiers, when they had a few minutes’ relaxation from the grim business of killing, were entirely occupied in distributing their own rations among the civilians and in comforting the children.

Outside the sound of firing was increasing in intensity, as though each side sought to achieve a final decision before the grey winter evening closed down once more. The smell of

cordite penetrated ever more strongly into the homely little room where the onions were hanging from the ceiling and a vividly imaginative picture on the wall showed Italian soldiers galloping into battle, brandishing sabres and mounted on snow-white chargers.

And that was the story of our entry into Ortona. It might be the story of Pescara, or Rimini, or Rome, or any town through which troops must fight their way. The details may change, but that crowded little room is the reality.

## XVI. The Halt Before Rome

AT Christmas the appointment of General Eisenhower as Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Allied forces in England, of Air Chief Marshal Tedder as Deputy Commander-in-Chief, and of General Montgomery as commander of the British forces for the invasion of Europe from the west was announced.

For us in Italy it meant the ringing down of the curtain upon the long epic of the Mediterranean war. Each of the five years of war had seen the Mediterranean loom larger and larger as a theatre of decision and Mr. Churchill's prescience in selecting this region for the main British land effort, and in refusing to be turned aside from his broad strategic conception by an immense amount of ill-instructed and often purely captious criticism, had been abundantly and repeatedly justified. Year by year the wisdom of this decision had become increasingly apparent, even in the end to most of those who would have had us fling an inadequate and under-equipped army on to the shores of France in 1942 or even in 1941, there to be swiftly and efficiently massacred.

It was the year 1943, however, which was the Mediterranean year *par excellence*, the year which had seen the follow-up from Alamein, the final conquest of Libya, the great Tunisian victory, the clearing of the Mediterranean for our shipping, the invasion

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Of Europe from the south and the surrender of Italy ; not to mention the establishment of a new type of permanent guerrilla front in the Balkans. The new appointments meant that the centre of gravity was now to be shifted elsewhere, that the Mediterranean would now become a secondary theatre of war and that the decisions taken at Quebec, Moscow and Teheran were to be implemented by an assault on the grand scale upon western Europe. And so the captains and the kings, the commanders and the picked men of their staffs departed. And, one after another, with varying degrees of celerity, the newspapers and news agencies began to whistle back their correspondents in Italy for service with the armies of the Second Front. It was probably not realised at the time that Italy would continue to be the most prominent and active British theatre of war for nearly six months of the New Year.

Once again I reviewed the situation. Italy was to become a secondary sphere, the bulk of Anglo-American manpower and equipment was to be earmarked for the so-called Second Front (as though we had not already three major fronts in existence with a claim to that name, the Air Front over Germany, the Mediterranean and the Far East. But let that pass). There seemed, therefore, less case than ever for continuing the costly slogging match up the Italian Peninsula. Again, I ask myself whether, having possessed ourselves of the two objectives which we had entered the country to obtain, the elimination of Italy from the ranks of our enemies and the capture of the Foggia airfields, we had not achieved what we had set out to achieve. Would it not now be sound strategy to cut our losses, as great military commanders have always been prepared to do upon occasion, write off further hopes of Rome and Florence and the Po Valley, and concentrate upon consolidating our defence in depth in advance of Naples and Foggia ? I felt that it might be possible by means of feints to keep approximately the same number of German Divisions pinned in Italy as were already there. We could not, of course, keep up these feints indefinitely, but at the time most of us who were not actually in the know expected the Second Front to open towards the end of March. For there was an extraordinary tendency to under-

estimate the importance of winds and tides and high seas upon the planning of an amphibious operation.

I discussed these points in conversation with General Harding, Chief of Staff to General Alexander. He pointed out that it was better to employ our Divisions with some hope of achieving a real success than to tie the lesser number which we should still have to maintain there, to a war of stagnation with no such hopes. It is a very reasonable case, and it is difficult to say with decision whether it has been justified by events or not.

The capture of Ortona, after nearly nine days of street fighting, brought the Eighth Army offensive to an end. There was not a kick left in it, and General Sir Oliver Leese, formerly commander of Thirty Corps, who now succeeded Montgomery in charge of the Army, appeared to have inherited a somewhat thankless task. The Army was tired, weakened by losses, and could see no apparent military objective ahead of it. A lengthy lull seemed in prospect. But there was hard fighting to come before spring had fully arrived.

I went out on two or three occasions with John Soboleff. His zest for exchange was now stronger. His schoolboy zest for exchange and barter was growing stronger than ever. During one of the last days of fighting in Ortona we made contact with a platoon which was about to go into action to clear some of the remaining streets. The platoon commander was in the process of giving his final instructions to the various sections when we arrived. It did not seem the appropriate moment to interrupt him. But he had an Italian revolver, a Luger, in his hand, and that was altogether too much for John.

"I see you got very nice Luger," he said. "See here, pal, I give you this watch in exchange."

"Yes, yes, but excuse me just one moment . . . now I want C section to work round under cover of the wall over on the right . . ."

"But look here, pal, I tell you what I do," persisted John, who was not easily discouraged. "I got very nice dinner jacket in London. I give you dinner jacket as well as watch for that Luger."

"Yes, it's very kind of you, I know, but I really am rather

busy just now. . . . Corporal Pickford, are you quite clear about what you have to do . . . ?”

And so it went on. But for once John was foiled. He didn't get his revolver.

Another day (I record John's failures rather than his triumphs, because they are "news" in the sense that "Man Bites Dog" is "news") we visited Ortona in search of a typewriter which John alleged was hidden in the wall of one of the shops in the town. The owner of the shop had told John that he could have the typewriter if he could find it. John had been supplied with the address of the shop and he was determined to poke about until he found it. Personally, I would as soon have thought of prodding about inside a building in Ortona at that time as I would have thought of jerking the tripwire of a mine "just to see if the thing really worked," but it did occur to me that if I accompanied John I might be instrumental in delaying the entry of one native of Omsk into the next world, and so I went with him.

We found the shop, but it was crowded with Canadian soldiers who had just come out of the line. They sat or lay on every available square foot of floor-space, and John's fumbling attempts to discover some hidden panel in the wall, combined with his broken English, caused us to be viewed with such suspicion that he was finally persuaded to desist.

On New Year's Eve it rained in torrents and the wind blew with the force of a hurricane. In the little coastguard's cottage on a cliff-top overlooking the Adriatic we lay wrapped in blankets listening to the gale outside. We couldn't keep the rain from pelting in through our glassless window. Now and then (or so it seemed) the Adriatic stood straight up on its side and poured in through the window space, until I began to wonder whether it would sweep in one of the smaller Dalmatian islands, possibly with a tiny partisan, or even a microscopic chetnik, clinging precariously to it. To me it seemed the most powerful tempest that I could recall since that far-distant mid-war blizzard of . . . was it March, 1917? It would have done credit to the big scene of a gala production of "King Lear." It was just such a night heralding the new year as would formerly have kept the soothsayers working overtime foretelling a

year of turmoil and strife and the overthrow of kings and empires.

It was impossible to go forward through the wind and rain next day, so John and I sat in front of the fire in the coast-guard's cottage. I read "Persuasion," and decided that had any other name but that of Jane Austen appeared on the title-page nothing could have preserved the book from well-merited obscurity. I had never before seen John open a book, but all day he sat absorbed in an odd volume of Gibbon's "Decline and Fall." At length he laid it down.

"Very interesting!" he said. "But how badly the man writes!"

The Adriatic front was so obviously dead by this time that I had no hesitation in crossing back, a day or two later, to the Fifth Army. It was an easy day's drive from one side of Italy to the other. About midway across the peninsular we stopped for a roadside picnic lunch. I hadn't troubled to make any special preparations for the meal, knowing that John, like the Lord, would provide. Sure enough he proceeded to the opening of a large crate that he had been carrying at the back of the car. His eye gleamed.

Inside were forty hard-boiled eggs.

And on that note let us regretfully take leave of him.

Over on the Fifth Army front a new plan was on the tapis and was soon to be put into execution. It was a plan that seemed to offer greater prospects of success than any which had conditioned our advance since the campaign had begun to slow down after the occupation of Naples and Foggia three months earlier. The operation which for months past we had hoped to see undertaken was now about to occur. A landing was to be made on the coast nearer to Rome and far behind the enemy's lines. Preceding this landing, French, British and American forces were to begin an advance along the entire Fifth Army front with a view to pinning down the enemy Divisions opposite them so as to prevent them from withdrawing troops from the main front to oppose our landing forces. If all went well, however, it was hoped that this secondary assault might carry the formidable Cassino position.



The aim of the new landing, which was to be made in the neighbourhood of Nettuno and Anzio, as stated by Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, the new Commander-in-Chief of the Allied forces in the Mediterranean, was to establish a threat in the rear of the enemy and thereby "to break the deadlock caused by the great difficulties of weather and terrain which we had experienced on the Italian front." It was not implied that the landing would be followed by a direct drive from the beach-head upon Rome, although the disembarkations were to take place only forty-five miles from the capital. The purpose was rather to cut the roads, Highway Six and Highway Seven, which formed the lines of supply of the German Fourteenth Army and compel them to retreat from their main positions by the leverage of this threat from the rear. At the same time, though no immediate drive upon Rome was contemplated, there was a general impression that the capital should be in our hands in not more than a fortnight or three weeks.

The American advance which carried their troops through the hillside villages of San Pietro, San Vittore and Cervaro began to get going as early as January 5. But these villages, though of great natural strength, were in advance of the Cassino-Rapido-Garigliano line, and the Germans, after some resistance at each point, were content to fall back behind the cover of their prepared positions. The Americans followed them up closely, and on January 15 occupied Monte Trocchio, an isolated razor-crested ridge that looks straight on to Cassino from a distance of only three miles.

I had paid a flying visit to Cairo in the middle of January, and knowing of the impending attack I began to fear that I might be cutting things rather fine, particularly as air passage priorities are tricky things. There were heavy bookings, I found, on all the planes going west from Egypt and sea travel would be exasperatingly slow. For a day or two I had some fear of being "caught out of position," which is one of the war correspondent's twin bogeys. (The other bogey is delay in the transmission of his despatches. I do not include censorship among the bogeys. To my mind it is very often, though by no means invariably, the bad, foolish or irresponsible

correspondent who makes most fuss about the evils of censorship.)

If you want travel facilities badly enough to make a thorough nuisance of yourself, you can usually get what you require. I found a freight plane that was leaving for Italy with space for a passenger or two. That was just what I wanted.

If I travelled only for pleasure I should always prefer to make my journeys, for æsthetic reasons, in a really well-sprung coach, with a sedan chair for short distances. Who wouldn't? But if one has to travel fast, then it seems to me best to go very fast indeed. I left Cairo at midnight on Saturday, reached Malta in time for a rather early breakfast in the R.A.F. mess on Sunday morning, flew on to Bari in time for lunch and caught an afternoon plane from Bari across the breadth of Italy to Naples. In Naples I learned that I was among those correspondents who had been allotted to the main, as distinct from the Anzio, front. There was no transport available for getting up forward, but I found a sergeant of the Army Film Unit, which is a sort of half-brother to the press, and bribed him with cigarettes to drive me up forward in his lorry very early on the following morning, as I knew that our offensive was timed to begin within the next twenty-four hours. We started off from Naples at four o'clock on the following morning, our only illumination the gun flashes on the northern horizon, where the gunners of General McCreary's Tenth British Corps were shelling the German positions on the further side of the Gari-gliano. At seven in the morning, thirty-one hours after leaving Cairo, I walked into the press camp at Sessa Aurunca, a couple of miles behind the front line.

During that three-hour drive from Naples through the warm southern night I experienced an intense and joyous sense of anticipation. The offensive was opening and Rome seemed almost within our reach—somewhere beyond the flashes of our guns lay the Eternal City which I had never seen. I happen to be of those who invariably recite verse to themselves during periods of emotional exaltation. (We would sing if we dared, but nature has not gifted us.) And as I drove northwards towards the sound of the guns—what a curiously warm night it was!—exultant with the wicked intoxication of shell-

fire, a poem, very *démodé* these many years, kept jiggling through my head. It was Swinburne's "Halt Before Rome."

The plan of attack on Fifth Army front was, in essentials, a simple one. On the left the British Tenth Corps, consisting from left to right of Fifth Division, Fifty-sixth Division and Forty-Sixth Division, was to attack directly across the Gari-gliano. The country beyond the river is a tangled mass of hills, and although the crossing might be speedily accomplished, subsequent progress was almost certain to be slow. On our coastal flank Fifth Division might get as far as the little port of Gaeta, but that was about the best that could be reasonably expected.

On the centre and right centre the American Second Corps was to go into action. On its left the attack would be made across the lower Rapido in the neighbourhood of the village of San Angelo. Beyond the river the country is flat and open, and there is room for the manœuvring of armoured units. This attack was entrusted to the American Thirty-Sixth Division, which had received its baptism of fire at the Salerno landing and had later been engaged in the stiff hill fighting at San Pietro. Having experienced two of the toughest types of military operation—a forced landing and an attack upon a fortified mountain position—it now had to encounter a third—the crossing of a river in the face of determined enemy forces.

On the right of Thirty-Sixth Division, Thirty-Fourth Division, an excellent and battle-experienced unit, was directed upon Cassino itself and the upper Rapido. Cassino was every bit as strongly fortified as Ortona, where the Eighth Army offensive had come to a halt a month earlier, and was a much more vital pivotal position in their defence system.

To the north the French Corps of General Juin, which had already made excellent progress through difficult mountain country, was to conform to the movements of the Americans by swinging forward to keep their flank covered and if necessary to distract attention from the Cassino area by maintaining a steady pressure of its own.

Now there was only one sector of this whole front which offered the opportunity of reasonably swift exploitation. That

was the lower Rapido, where the crossing of the river would give access to the open country beyond. The Germans had not at that time the concentration of gun-power in the hills that they afterwards achieved, and infantry which had once got into the plain, though overlooked by the mountains to the north behind Cassino, could probably have kept the enemy on the move. The rôle of Thirty-Sixth Division, who were to force the river, was therefore vital.

Cassino is one of the strongest natural defensive positions in the whole Italian peninsula. For at least two generations it has been recognised as such in Italian military textbooks. But its history reaches back many centuries further. In the year 217 B.C. Hannibal, having routed the Romans at the battle of Lake Trasimene, had marched into southern Italy in the hope of raising the Samnites and other non-Latin peoples against Rome. Misled by a native guide who, instead of leading the army to Casilinum (the modern Capua), as he had been instructed, brought it to Casinum and was promptly and without any shilly-shallying crucified for his pains, Hannibal found himself, quite contrary to his intention, in a country of "rocks and mountains." And the Romans sat upon the mountains all around. They sat upon Monte Carro, they sat upon the Cervaro ridge, possibly they sat upon Monte Trocchio and the hills beyond the Garigliano. Hannibal looked like being bottled up in a bowl beneath these hills. Eventually he got away, so we are told, by the ingenious device of catching three hundred foxes, tying lighted faggots to their tails and sending them off at night to distract the Romans towards one side of the bowl while he and his army made off in the opposite direction. "Every schoolboy" knows that.

I lived for nearly three months in the neighbourhood of Cassino. But I never saw more than one fox during the entire period.

Fifth and Fifty-Sixth Divisions duly carried out the first phase of their task. On the night of January 17-18 they crossed the Garigliano on a ten-mile front. The operation was perhaps the most smoothly executed of all the river crossings which we carried out in the course of that winter. But once established beyond the river, at a depth varying from half a mile to three miles, our troops found it impossible to make further significant

progress. Fifth Division took the abandoned hill town of Minturno near the coast, but Fifty-Sixth Division, who had counted on getting into Castelforte after the first twenty-four hours were held up before this village, which was dominated by the hills beyond, and it was actually four months and not twenty-four hours before they took Castelforte. After that the Garigliano battle dwindled into insignificance, though fighting continued sporadically among the hills beyond the river for nearly a month. It had served its purpose in pinning down German troops who might otherwise have been used against us at Anzio, and it had shown once again that in any operation against a river line the greatest difficulty lies not in the actual crossing, but in exploiting to any distance beyond if the country is mountainous and unfavourable to the use of tanks.

More significance and more tragedy attached to the operations further north on the Rapido. On January 20 Thirty-Sixth Division forced two bridgeheads over the river on either side of San Angelo. But from the first this attack was ill-starred. The near bank of the river had not been sufficiently reconnoitred, and in getting to their start line the American troops were hampered by the number of mines which they encountered as a consequence. This threw their time-table, which depended upon speed, considerably out of gear. Next, it would appear that the preliminary artillery bombardment had been insufficient in scale, since a considerable number of German machine-gun posts remained very much on the *qui vive* close to the river bank. These proved sufficient to turn the tide of the battle.

In rubber dinghies and wooden boats the Americans crossed the fifty-foot stream, but, raked by short-range machine-gun and mortar fire, they soon lost their southern bridgehead. North of San Angelo they clung on under miserable conditions for fully forty-eight hours. There was little opportunity of obtaining cover, since the country beyond the Rapido is flat and open in this sector. There was no elbow-room for manœuvre, for the infantry were never able to penetrate more than a quarter of a mile beyond the river bank. Moreover, and this proved the decisive factor, it was found impossible to establish bridges across the river, since the crossings were swept by enemy fire and in that open plain there was absolutely no concealment for

the engineers. It was afterwards suggested that greater use of smoke-screens to mask the bridging operations might have made a difference. I doubt it. The enemy could estimate where the bridges were likely to be located and could plaster the area with fire. That is what did happen, and that is what will always happen in a river crossing operation when the bridgehead is both too shallow and too narrow. As the stream was running so strongly, swollen by the winter rains, that even boats could not make the crossing, the hapless infantry of Thirty-Sixth Division were cut off from all means of supply.

What happened to the men in that tiny bridgehead is none too clear. We do not know how many were killed or how many were forced to lay down their arms, but within four days of the original crossing the force established beyond the Rapido had been wiped out. No one escaped to tell the tale. Through a succession of mishaps it had proved impossible either to reinforce or to supply them. When a soldier has shot away all his ammunition, has no more rations or water left and must lie day and night in such a shelter-trench as he has been able to scoop out for himself while under constant fire from enemy machine-gunners only a few hundred yards away, what is there left for him to do? They died in the dark, and the U.S. Thirty-Sixth Division was practically destroyed as an effective fighting unit. A world-famous American correspondent who was present with the Division at the time told me a few days later that he regarded this action as the most serious disaster suffered by United States forces since Pearl Harbour.

The defeat on the Rapido was a great misfortune to the Allied force in Italy, for this particular sector was one which offered the best opportunity of breaking the powerful Gustav line, and it was subsequently selected by General Alexander for his decisive attack in May. It is difficult to avoid a feeling that in this particular vital area mistakes were made which might have been avoided. The minefields on the near bank of the Rapido *ought* to have been reconnoitred and lifted. The artillery preparation *ought* to have been more thorough and should have ensured the virtual elimination of the enemy's machine-guns and mortars. And every effort should have been made to secure as many bridgeheads as possible over the Rapido in the

hope that one or more of these might have been able to make sufficient progress to take the pressure off the others. The sector was too vital to the general plan to permit any slipshod organisation or execution. It is not too much to say that the failure on the Rapido in those dark January days threw the entire Allied plan out of gear and drove the commanders back upon the costly and unsuccessful direct attacks upon Cassino and Monastery Hill which characterised the next two months.

But in the meantime the Anglo-American force had effected its landing at Anzio, some forty-five miles south of Rome, under circumstances of peculiar, one might say almost uncanny, ease. That the enemy can have been unaware that something of the sort was being planned is out of the question. In the clear and sunny days of mid-January a large fleet had been assembling in the port of Naples. The meteorologists had promised our commanders fine weather for the assault, and the weather did in fact "play ball" with them, at any rate during the preliminaries and during the actual landing operation. Obviously the Germans were informed that a fresh landing was imminent, but they did not anticipate it at Anzio. They were preparing to meet one at Gaeta or Terracina, either of which would have had the direct objective of turning the German flank on the Garigliano, or at Civita Vecchia close to the mouth of the Tiber.

The original assault force consisted of the British First Division on the left and the American Third Division on the right, supported by American Rangers and British Commandos. In the subsequent build-up the First American Armoured Division was to be the chief exploiting force. Since the aim of the landing was primarily to distract German attention from the main front rather than to develop any spectacular dash on Rome there was a certain cautiousness and rigidity about the time-table. Landing—Consolidation—Exploitation were the three phases, and it soon became clear that there was going to be no question of any overlapping of these phases. Phase Two would be completed before any attempt was made to put Phase Three into operation. Therein lay one of the chief causes of the failure of the expedition to achieve any significant results.

On that sunny Saturday morning, January 22, this could not

be foreseen. Everything went with the smoothness of a practice exercise. There were, it is true, a number of minefields along the shore, a single coastal battery did in fact open up against the troops, and there was some fire from a German 88 mm. over on the left, but that was just about all. Four German soldiers who were spending their leave in the seaside villages of Anzio and Nettuno were captured in an advanced state of intoxication. And still the landing-craft moved smoothly backwards and forwards disembarking troops with an unbroken rhythm. The men on the beaches could see the frowning mass of the Alban Hills which dominate Rome—perhaps some twenty minutes' run from the coast in a fast car—and there appeared very little evidence of hostile troops in between. The contrast with Salerno seemed complete.

But it was just because the operation had been planned with Salerno in mind that the dominating note was one of caution. The Salerno landing had been heavily opposed. Therefore in this case a high priority in disembarkation had been given to defensive arms. Had it been possible to send a force of armoured cars and cruiser tanks straight up the road into Rome that first morning all might have been different.\* But the tactical programme had not allowed for so easy a disembarkation, and accordingly the priorities did not allow for rapid exploitation. At the same time one cannot acquit the Corps commander, General Lucas, who was directly in charge of the landing force. (He was subsequently, though too late, superseded by the more forceful General Truscott.) General Alexander and General Clark both arrived on the scene within a few hours of the first landings, and the former urged vigorous measures. But routine had to be followed, and as so often in this war, we lost the opportunity of exploiting unexpected success through the rigidity and lack of flexibility in our command. At that time the Germans had no more than two Divisions in the neighbourhood of Rome, but they were not concentrated and were not prepared, as I have stated, for a landing at that point. At Rome there was a very real flap, not dissimilar to that which we ourselves had known in Cairo in July, 1942. There was a great

\* A friend of mine who lived in Rome before the war has told me that he used to reckon three-quarters of an hour for the drive down to Rome for his daily bathe in summer. But he had a racing car and a racing temperament.



deal of hasty packing up and hasty burning of papers, and the appearance of a raiding force, even in quite small numbers in the streets of the capital, would certainly have accentuated this. Admittedly it could not have stayed there, admittedly it was no part of our strategy to aim at the direct occupation of Rome. Our purpose was to cause the enemy to pull back from his very powerful Gustav Line along the Rapido and Garigliano by this sudden threat to his rear. But to make it effective it was necessary that the threat should exert the maximum "scare value." And that was what it signally failed to do. The parallel is obvious to all who remember the last war. The Anzio landing has its counterpart in the almost equally smooth disembarkation at Suvla Bay in Gallipoli in August, 1915, and the hapless General Lucas was the spiritual son of the easy-going, well-intentioned General Stopford.

The potentialities of Anzio was really thrown away in the first twenty-four or at any rate the first forty-eight hours. Once the preliminary surprise had passed, the chance of a successful raid upon Rome was at an end. We had landed on the Saturday morning. If we intended to raid Rome and the two great German communication roads, Route Six and Route Seven, we should not have delayed beyond Saturday afternoon or Sunday morning at the very latest. If this seems to demand an excessive speed in unloading I can only say that I have made the D Day landing in Sicily, in Italy and in Normandy, and I have seen just how rapidly tanks and armoured vehicles do pour ashore once the foothold has been secured. In each case the landing which I witnessed took place upon an open beach with not even the modest port facilities of Anzio. Nuisance raiding was perfectly possible, I am convinced, and its moral value would have been out of all proportion to the actual losses suffered or inflicted.

I do not mean that the scope of the operation should have been immediately changed. That is far too difficult an undertaking for a modern army with all its multifarious needs. But there should have been room *within the framework of the general plan* to take advantage of a windfall; there should have been the initiative on the part of the officers on the spot. There was neither.

It speedily became clear that the advantage of surprise was being sacrificed, that we were proceeding with Phase Two—Consolidation—in accordance with the textbook, with an entire lack of hustle as though “Time stood still and Philip still reigned in the Escorial.” Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, who had shortly before succeeded General Eisenhower in the Central Mediterranean command, made it clear in an open Press Conference held on Monday, just forty-eight hours after the landings, that he expected the Germans to counter-attack. “If the Germans run true to type—and they always do—they will counter-attack our beach-head,” he said. By implication he made it clear that we were thinking in terms of meeting and coping with counterblows rather than of rapid exploitation.

All this was broadcast over the radio before Monday was out, and was published throughout the world press on Tuesday morning. The reader may be able to persuade himself that General Wilson’s public guess at enemy intentions was part of an elaborate game of bluff. I cannot so convince myself, nor can I feel that this advertisement of our anticipations of enemy reactions was altogether timely.

Kesselring reacted with briskness and vigour to our challenge. There was an early indication that the major purpose of our landing had failed, and that there was going to be no question of a voluntary German withdrawal from the Gustav Line. On the Tuesday morning following “Anzio Saturday” a German Order of the Day was captured on the person of a German officer of the Third Panzer Grenadier Division which at that time was opposing our troops on the Garigliano. It ran as follows :

“The Führer orders that the Gustav position shall be held at all costs, since a fully successful defence would have important political repercussions. The Führer relies upon every yard of ground being contested most fiercely.”

This order was to be read out to all units engaged in the defence of the Line.

While there was ample room for speculation about the precise interpretation to be placed upon the phrase “important political repercussions,” the significance of the document was obvious. The Germans were not going to let themselves be stampeded

out of Cassino or from the banks of the Garigliano. We should have to fight more bitterly than ever all the way.

It was not deeply intelligent to have supposed otherwise. The year 1944 is not the year 1744 and the strategy of the decorous wars of the eighteenth century, which was dominated by manœuvres, marches and counter-marches with only the occasional irruption of an armed clash, is not the strategy of the days of total war. Nor do Hitler and the German High Command react to a threat to the rear and communications of their armies in the manner which characterised those Austrian commanders of the eighteenth century without whom military history would be, in Philip Guedalla's pointed phrase, "like Hamlet without Rosencrantz and Guildenstern."

During the last week in January the Germans proceeded to re-concentrate to meet the threat with the same speed and resource which they had shown at the time of our North African landings, again in the face of our attempt to rush Catania in July, and yet a third time opposite our Salerno landing in September. Holding us at first with a shadow force of self-propelled guns and tanks, they began to build up rapidly in front of Rome and around the Alban Hills. There was some thinning out but no withdrawal from the Gustav Line. It was most marked opposite the British troops on the Garigliano where Kesselring rightly estimated that our offensive had shot its bolt, and where the tangle of hills offered almost insuperable difficulties to any exploitation of the advance. But troops were brought from the stagnant Eighth Army sector on the Adriatic, they were rushed down from northern Italy, from Croatia and from the south of France, despite the programme of road and rail interdiction set by the Allied air forces. High hopes had been built upon the effectiveness of this interdiction programme but there was some misunderstanding about what could actually be done in the way of "sealing off" the Rome sector from supplies and reinforcements. The "cutting" of roads and railways by air bombardment is only a temporary not an absolute form of interdiction, and it is probable that we seriously underestimated the efficiency and rapidity of the German repair methods. Perhaps the air force communiqués during those days were over-confident, perhaps our Intelligence was misled

about the speed of the German build-up. One certainly got the impression at the time that no one quite knew the real numbers of the enemy—even in broad terms of Divisions—who were gathering against us, and estimates varied grotesquely from day to day. After the bright weather that had prevailed on the Saturday and the Sunday, rough seas hampered our own build-up on the third, fourth and fifth days, and in the overcast weather our air forces were no longer able to continue their interdiction programme on the same scale. There was also some peevish talk of an uncharted sandbar in front of Anzio harbour which prevented the approach of our larger ships and compelled them to unload by lighter.

But all these factors are beside the point. The benefits of Anzio were really lost within the first few hours and long before the German counter-concentration had seriously begun.

By Sunday, January 30, the ninth day ashore, our build-up was for the time being complete, and our troops were ready for the advance. The general plan was for the Americans on the right, with their open flank guarded by the Mussolini Canal, to advance and take Cisterna Littoria, about twelve miles inland, while the British on their left moved up from the model agricultural colony (which came to be known as the Factory) at Carroceto to attack Campoleone. While this direct advance by the infantry with tank support was taking place the First American Armoured Division, which had previously fought in Tunisia, was to be flung wide on the left, where there was believed to be little opposition, to exploit as fully as possible in the general direction of Rome.

The infantry went forward very much according to plan. The Americans got practically to Cisterna, while on the British sector the 24th Brigade of Guards moving forward before dawn discovered the enemy in front of them retreating in disorder—or so it appeared at the time. German machine-gun nests had been methodically destroyed by artillery fire on the previous day, and although German tanks had been encountered the support given by our own tanks and self-propelled guns seemed adequate. In short, the advance of the infantry, if not proceeding with any undue rapidity, appeared to be going very much in

accordance with the time-table, but on the left the American armour had signally failed to get through. Running into an unreconnoitred minefield they suffered some early losses, and when the German artillery began to range upon them the attempt to break through was abandoned.

It was the old dilemma of an armoured force—to go on and risk heavy losses, but perhaps obtain the necessary objective after writing off a good part of the tank strength; or to cut one's losses, surrender the initiative but keep the armoured force in being. There is no golden rule for deciding which is the better policy. The decision in each case must be directed by the particular and local circumstances, also by the importance attached to the general objective. The holding up of the American armour on the left is usually regarded as the cause of the failure of the advance from Anzio, but in fact no part of the Allied line had really easy going. On the British sector a battalion of the Sherwood Foresters had got almost as far as Campoleone, but they found themselves enfiladed on both flanks by German machine-gunners posted in the loop-holed houses, and by concealed German tanks. The American infantry had been no more fortunate. Their Rangers ran straight into German tank fire and attempting to form some sort of defensive line under the shelter of a deep walled ditch they found themselves trapped. The German tanks commanded the ditch at both ends, and their guns raked it with fire. On its comparatively limited scale it was one of the most terrible actions in the campaign—the infantrymen caught by tanks in a position from which they could not extricate themselves, where they could barely move, and where they had no means of bringing anti-tank fire to bear.

It was a dreadful way to die.

Scarcely twenty-four hours had sufficed to change the whole character of the Anzio situation. An operation in which our forces appeared to be rolling forward with deliberation but decision on Monday morning had been everywhere halted by Tuesday morning, and the initiative had been everywhere wrested from us, not to be recovered until the general advance upon Rome more than three months later. The Germans had been discovered to be in greater strength than we had anticipated;

they had inflicted a sharp reverse upon us, and the offensive potentialities of the beach-head were at an end.

It was all so staggeringly abrupt, this transfer from an offensive with far-reaching objectives to a "back to the beaches" defence. Yet once the decision had been taken that the exploitation of Anzio was not "on," there was no further beating of the head against the wall of growing German strength, and General Alexander deserves credit for the speed with which he made, and subsequently implemented, his decision to shift the centre of gravity of his offensive back to the Gustav Line.

But now it had become a question not of whether we could rush the Alban hills and Rome, or compel the withdrawal of the enemy from the Rapido and Garigliano, but rather of whether we could hang on to the beach-head at all. The ominous names "Tobruk" and even "Dunkirk" began to be heard in messes and places where they talk. Was it to be the Tobruk that held out for thirty-six weeks in 1941, or the Tobruk that was stormed in less than thirty-six hours in 1942?

The Germans launched three main counter-offensives against the beach-head. The first began to develop as early as the night of February 3, in the form of a direct thrust straight down the road towards Anzio port. It was the Guards Brigade that took the weight of it. Though rather hastily improvised and with smaller numbers than those which they subsequently employed, this attack was dangerous because of the infiltration tactics which the enemy employed. Our own forces at this stage were still thin on the ground, and the Germans began to seep through in the course of the night between one battalion and another, even between one company and its neighbour. Our defensive positions were necessarily rudimentary, and we had not the artillery which was so effective against the later assaults. It was a near thing, and with the Irish and Scots Guards battalions both temporarily isolated the Grenadier Guards received orders that "they must fight it out in their present positions."

On Friday, February 4, it really was touch and go. First one unit, then another found both their flanks in the air as small parties of German infantry established themselves within and behind our defences, and all the while the German self-

propelled guns kept pounding our men in their shallow shelter trenches. But just as the darkness on Thursday had favoured the enemy infiltrations, so on Friday night the luck was with us and of the isolated groups which had been cut off in forward positions a good proportion managed to make their way back to the support line for regrouping.

If the enemy had possessed follow-up troops he might have continued this tactic until we were driven to the beaches, and thereby have achieved a small-scale Dunkirk. The moral effect of such a success upon the troops preparing to counter the invasion on the shores of France can be imagined. But Kesselring had attacked merely with what happened to be in hand, just as Rommel had done when he first arrived before Alamein in July, 1942. It was probably the wisest thing he could do, and it formed a sharp contrast to the more easy-going methods of our own local command. But he was just not strong enough. Heavy attacks went on until February 9. Again and again whole companies and even battalions were surrounded and lost touch even with their immediate superior headquarters. The Germans ultimately got into the "Factory" and appeared to be concentrating there for the final assault towards the sea. But the Allied gunners saved the situation. The entire artillery of the Corps was turned on to the Factory and its satellite buildings. Just as the bombers had saved the Salerno force by their attack on Battipaglia, so the gunners broke up the German infantry at Carroceto.

It was obvious, however, that the Germans would not rest content with this near-success, and during the days that followed, General Alexander's Staff worked rapidly to strengthen the position at the beach-head. Rightly judging that the canals on the right and the boggy ground that covered much of the rest of the front would restrict the line of the next German advance, they concentrated upon stores and, above all, upon guns and shells. It would not be mobility but sheer fire-power that would settle the coming attack. Wherever the Germans advanced there must be the power to lay down such a wall of fire that only a small proportion of the attackers could struggle through. It was to be a gunners' battle, and its success would depend upon getting the shells there in time. And so the

## THE HALT BEFORE ROME

convoys crept up from Naples to Anzio night after night. And the enemy two-man midget submarines which lay hid by day in the mouth of the Tiber would slip out at night to attack our shipping. But despite this the guns and shells continued to arrive until we were unloading five thousand tons of war material at the little port of Anzio and the adjacent beaches every day throughout February when weather conditions permitted.

The second German counter-offensive developed on February 17, and continued for three days. It was made in much greater strength than its predecessor, for Kesselring threw six Divisions against the centre of our front in a direct drive towards the sea. It was just a head-on frontal assault by infantry with tanks used purely as support weapons, and although they drove a shallow wedge into our front, the enemy suffered far too heavily in the process, and after three days of taking murderous infantry losses was compelled to call a halt. A third assault which followed in the last days of the month, employing fewer infantry but more tanks, met with the same fate.

By the beginning of March the threat to the beach-head was at an end. The final position was satisfactory to neither side. The high hopes, justified by the unopposed landing, had been bitterly dashed, but the enemy had helped to even things up by the losses which he underwent in his successive counter-attacks. The situation was really summed up in a remark which General Alexander made to me about this time :

"No enterprise in war ever turns out quite so well or so badly as the first reports lead you to believe."

That is true of the situation on the day of the landing in January, when it was roses, roses all the way ; but it is no less true of the position when the enemy counter-measures began to develop. Meanwhile Anzio remained a thorn in the enemy's side from which we might still launch out a further blow at Rome whenever the Fifth Army should have forced the Gustav and Adolf Hitler Lines.



## XVII.

## Cassino

ABOUT five miles beyond Capua the road from Naples to Rome forks into two branches. The peace-time traveller, making the journey by car to the capital, would normally swing his car to the left at this point and pursue the route known as Highway Seven, which passed by Formia and the Pontine Marshes to Rome. But should he take fancy to try the inland route he would discover himself entering more attractive and wilder scenery. On either side, but especially on his right, the mountains would gradually close in upon the route. An intriguing village with a stone castle in a separate glen of its own he would discover, on reference to his guide-book, bore the name of Mignano. Farther on there would be occasional glimpses of primitive villages, some thirty or forty stone hovels, villages that seemed to cling precariously to the mountain-side, shyly avoiding contact with the sophistication of the main road. If the traveller consulted his guide-book again, as he probably would not, he would learn that these villages bore the names of San Pietro, San Vittore and Cervaro, and that not one of them was of the slightest importance, or possessed of any historical significance.

Over on his left the ground would drop down towards an open plain with one bare outcrop of rock, like a whale's back and razor-pointed along the crest, rising some three hundred feet abruptly out of the open plain. This is Monte Trocchio, which was occupied by American troops almost without opposition in mid-January and from the summit of which it is possible to obtain perfect observation over Cassino.

A moment later the road takes a sharp swing to the left and Cassino comes full into sight. Even before war had made it famous, it was a view that would have caused any traveller to pause in admiration.

A great wall of mountain rises directly ahead at a distance of some three miles, abrupt and steep, and seen with the naked eye it presents something of the flat finality of a theatre back-

cloth. The highest peak, Mount Cairo, is about five thousand feet above sea level, a bare snow-capped crest, uninhabitable, untenable to friend and foe. Lower down on the left, forming the southern buttress of this mountain bastion is a peak crested by a long, two-storied building not unlike a nineteenth-century English public school. This is the Benedictine Abbey of Cassino, founded by Saint Benedict himself, the father of Mediæval monasticism in the year 529. The present buildings are largely a nineteenth-century restoration.

Fifteen hundred feet below at the very foot of the mountain lies the town of Cassino, itself immediately dominated by a small peak which forms a low outcrop of the monastery hill. A single Mediæval tower crowns its summit. In front of Cassino flows the Rapido River, a puny stream at this point but no mean obstacle to an attacking force which is overlooked by the mountain immediately ahead.

The mountain wall ends abruptly with Monastery Hill and to the south the country looks flat and most temptingly inviting. But this pleasant plain is intersected by the lower Rapido, and it is here that the Thirty-Sixth American Division had suffered so severe a defeat. For the time being all further advance across the river at that point was out of the question.

And so it had to be Cassino. Let us take a look at this position and its defensive possibilities, bearing in mind the three essential features of the terrain: the majestic curtain of rock which formed the backcloth, the river line in the middle distance with the town upon its further bank, and the open belt of meadow land some two miles broad in the foreground.

The first difficulty lay in this belt of open country. It might look easy enough to pass infantry across it up to the very banks of the river. But, in fact, throughout their advance they would necessarily come under direct observation from the hills opposite. Soon they must come within close machine-gun fire from the hidden defenders on the river bank. And long before they can reach the river they will inevitably run into thickly-strewn mine-fields, deepening into a positive pin-cushion in the neighbourhood of the river.

All along the forward bank of the river there were the usual protections—a ten-foot ditch, serving as an anti-tank trap,

belt after belt of barbed wire, and in one sector a twelve-foot wall.

Then there was the town of Cassino itself, dead and uninhabited to all outward appearances, but alert with machine-gunners waiting for the kill and honeycombed with booby-traps which meant death to the incautious. Behind the mountains rose abruptly, but not so abruptly as to deny the defenders plenty of gun positions. Gun positions on a hillside are difficult to spot and extremely difficult to hit with field artillery. The Germans had blasted out a number of caves in the mountain face. Within these they had concealed self-propelled field-guns. These guns, running on tracks, would emerge to fire and then pull back again into shelter. Nothing short of a direct hit in the mouth of the cave was of any use.

There were also the concrete pillboxes dispersed on the hillside and in the plain below, well camouflaged against the background of grey rock; and somewhere to the rear, hidden from view behind the shoulder of Monastery Hill, were the heavier German field-guns.

The enemy had been working all through the autumn on this position. They had sown their mines, they had hollowed out the rock and now they applied themselves to damming the Rapido as well. The result was that the waters of the river seeped out over the surrounding meadows. They changed the very shape of the terrain, for the perfectly good roads marked on our ordnance maps became watercourses with a thick bottom of mud, impassable even to a jeep.

That was the Cassino position against which American and British troops pitted themselves for so long.

Day after day, throughout January and February and March, I used to drive up to an observation post on the road near Cervaro and gaze across the open meadows towards Cassino, remembering how Hannibal must have stood and pondered perhaps on this precise spot when Fabius had bottled up his troops in the valley below. Cassino looked so near, so tantalisingly easy of access. It looked just about as distant as the further end of Regent's Park to anyone standing on the summit of Primrose Hill. I suppose we have all in childhood known some landmark that always formed the limit of our vision in

our daily walks. As a child one always wanted to reach that house or the summit of that hill and see what lay beyond. One used to feel that things might be quite different; it might be a sort of Looking-Glass world.

That was how I felt about Cassino. I longed to go striding down the hill and cover those last two miles along the arrow-straight road or across the smooth water meadows. I longed to see what Monte Cairo looked like from the other side.

On days when there was no shelling and before our aircraft had come to shatter the town the view looked even more peaceful than the pale grey dignity of London as seen from Primrose Hill. There was something terribly macabre about this riverside town, seemingly as placid as the loveliest Severn-side villages.

“Clunton and Clunbury,  
Clungford and Clun  
Are the quietest places  
Under the sun,”

wrote A. E. Housman, but I do not think even they looked quieter or more entrancing than did Cassino during those early days.

The road lay straight as a stretched ribbon across this belt of meadow-land. It looked so fatally easy to bowl down it into the town. Every now and then a vehicle with supplies for the forward troops used to overshoot its mark at night and drive straight down as far as the Rapido Bridge itself. It never got any further, and it never came back, for the Germans, who had thoughtfully left this stretch of road unmined, retained an ambushing force just beside the bridge.

From the first day that I looked at it I saw the defensive potentialities of the place, and I knew that it was going to provide us with the toughest obstacle we had yet encountered. That was in January, before the Americans had done more than probe the forward minefields. I then wrote:

“It is easy to understand why the Germans possessing a defensive position of this strength are reluctant to pull out and

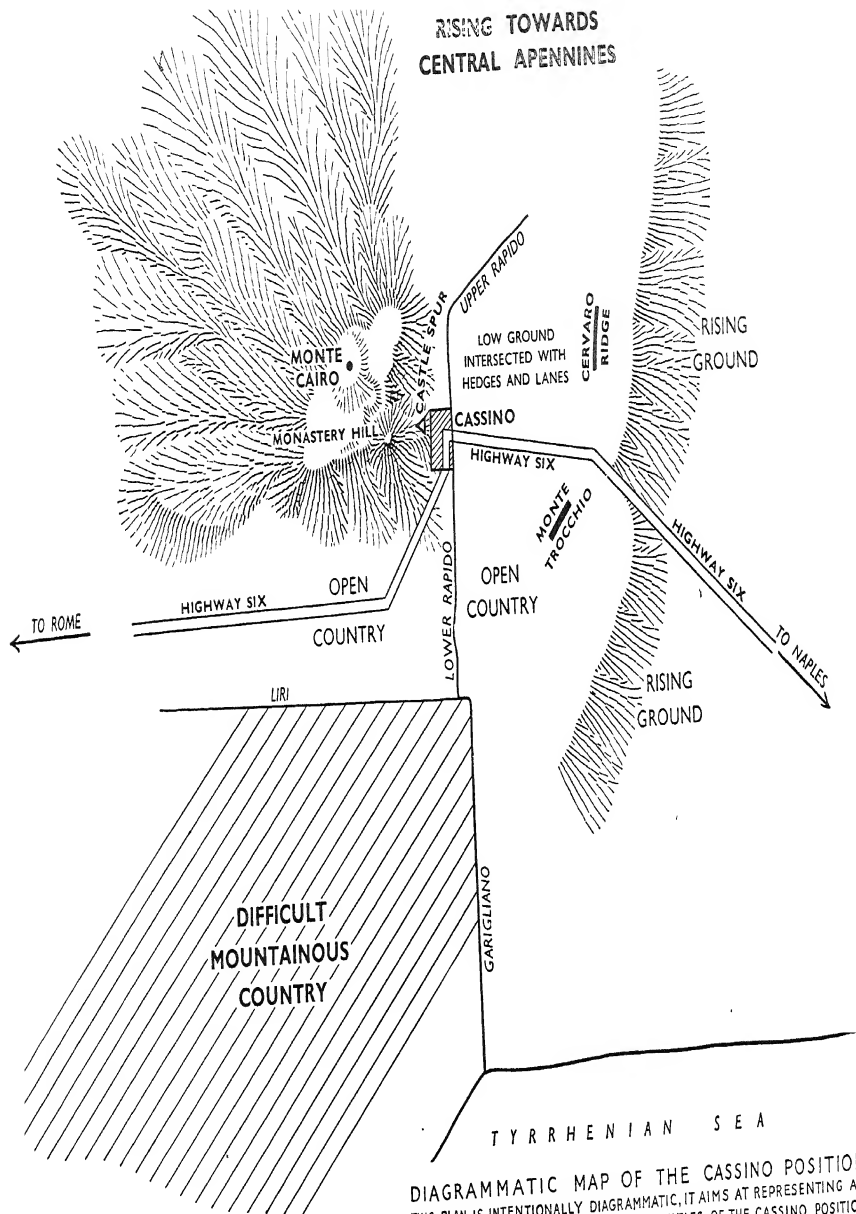
abandon it, despite the potential threat to their rear. It will not be easy to find any line so strong by nature and elaborated by fortifications farther back along the road to Rome. And so they will continue to fight for every ridge and crest, every river and hollow along this line. We can only break through the Cassino position by hard frontal hammering. And we shall see fighting in Cassino which will make the Battle of Ortona appear a comparatively easy-going and friendly affair. For the German will hang on to the end."

No operation in war has ever impressed me more than did the Battle of Cassino. There was something titanic about the setting in which it was waged. The grandeur of the backcloth never palled during those gradually lengthening days of Italian spring when I grew to know it so well that I can still shut my eyes and recall every detail of that dreadfully majestic scene. Always I see it as the painted backcloth of a stage set. It is far too theatrically improbable for nature. So often battle, which is the final and ultimate expression of human tragedy, is waged in such squalid settings, such as the brickyards and slums around Lens in the last war, or in settings that lack significance, as in so many of the Libyan battles. But in Sicily, where the hardest battles were fought under the shadow of Mount Etna, and in Italy it was otherwise. The settings were noble and theatrical. I do not divorce the words. And none was more noble than Cassino.

History had contributed to the enrichment of this setting. Romans and Samnites, Romans and Carthaginians had fought around Cassino. I had occasion during my last days in Italy to drive through the Caudine Forks, sufficiently familiar to students of Roman history. Like Oscar Wilde and the Atlantic Ocean, "I was not exactly satisfied" with them, for they proved to be very different from the narrow gorge one had expected. Mark Antony lived for a time at Cassino or, as Herr Baedeker guardedly comments, "delivered himself to his nameless orgies" there. Cassino was the hearth from which St. Benedict revolutionised the entire trend of Christianity. The conquerors of Italy at the time of the Renaissance passed that way; so did Garibaldi and his army of liberation three hundred years later. The place should be numinous with the intensity of life and



RISING TOWARDS  
CENTRAL APENNINES



DIAGRAMMATIC MAP OF THE CASSINO POSITION  
THIS PLAN IS INTENTIONALLY DIAGRAMMATIC, IT AIMS AT REPRESENTING AS  
SIMPLY AS POSSIBLE THE NATURAL DIFFICULTIES OF THE CASSINO POSITION







death that is bound up in it. I think it is. But for myself it is death that I associate with Cassino, death in many forms.

### *The First Battle*

There were really three distinct battles of Cassino before the final victorious assault in May which led to the advance upon Rome. The first of these is connected with the attempt of the American Thirty-Fourth Division, perhaps the best American troops in Italy, to force the town with infantry. It came near to success.

General Ryder, the Divisional Commander, had surveyed the ground and had come to the conclusion that the best prospect of success lay in a turning movement from the north to cross the Rapido where it was narrower and more easily fordable. The main force would then work down into the town by the road that follows the further bank; simultaneously, subsidiary forces would fan out over the lower slopes of Monte Cairo to cover the flank of the advance and eliminate as far as possible the German gun positions sited there. Cassino town was the objective. It formed a bottleneck between mountain and river, and the road to Rome which passed through it opened out beyond into the broad valley of Pontecorvo.

The attack developed during the last days of January, heralded by the ominous failure of Thirty-Sixth Division to force the lower Rapido to the south. Day after day Ryder's field-guns plastered the slopes of Monte Cairo with their shells, silencing one by one the German fixed gun positions, just across the valley. Meanwhile his infantry and tanks were feeling for a crossing. The Germans, having supplemented the effects of the winter rain by damming the river, had turned the surrounding meadows into morasses whose surface was about the colour and consistency of a thick lentil soup. Nowhere on the whole Divisional front was there any point where wheeled or tracked vehicle could pass across to the firm ground on the western bank.

Ryder accordingly determined to move his infantry up into the French sector further north and nearer to the source of the river. The enemy attention was held by the continuous fire of the American batteries directly across the river, which seemed to suggest an imminent frontal assault. Meanwhile the infantry,

with tanks in support, was passed up northwards into the French sector. Here the water was much shallower, and it was possible to ford the river.

At dawn on January 29 the first American infantry began to cross over by way of the ford. But there was no question of supplies for the German mortars and machine-guns promptly opened up upon them at close range. There was little that the Americans could do but dig themselves hastily into the soft ground and pray for the arrival of the tanks. But the tanks themselves were having difficulty with the ground, and it began to look as though this attack would suffer the fate of its predecessor further south.

The situation was saved by the employment of wire matting of the type which we used to lay down for wheeled and tracked vehicles across the soft sand of the Egyptian desert. This matting was spread over the soft ground at the ford, and as the mist began to close down towards a premature evening the American tanks passed across. By night the bridgehead was about a mile and a half deep across the river, and the tanks were there. The Gustav Line was breached and the Germans were retreating uphill into the mountains. It seemed as though it might be only a day or two before Cassino itself was occupied and the Allied forces could begin to pour northwards into the Plain of Frosinone and effect the link-up with the Anzio Beach-head.

That night the American infantry burrowed down as best they could into the soft ground, often within only a few yards of the enemy, and at dawn the attack was renewed. It was one of the queerest actions of that grim campaign. As day broke, the Germans began to pop up from their slit-trenches like rabbits, and the American infantrymen began picking them off at a few yards' range or stalking them up the slopes of Monte Cairo. But that day General Ryder's troops had an opportunity of testing the strength of the Gustav positions.

I have spoken of the concrete pillboxes built by the Germans around Cassino during the autumn. Some of them were large enough to contain twenty or thirty men. I saw one with bunks for twenty-eight and with underground stores of food and ammunition. Some of these pillboxes were connected with

one another by subterranean passages, and some were joined in the same way with the fire trenches of the infantry. Others were just single-man pillboxes, just large enough to contain one machine-gunner and a charcoal brazier—for those who planned these defences had not overlooked the necessity of keeping their soldiers warm. Farm-houses had been adapted for the purposes of defence. Inside the principal room a small inner room had been built. It was walled with heavy logs and strengthened with barricades of crushed stone. Again and again a shell which scored a direct hit upon one of these farm-houses would apparently demolish the building in its entirety. The American infantry would go forward and then the hidden gun would open up on them. And much the same thing happened later inside Cassino itself, when anti-tank guns continued to fire from the cellars of houses which had been demolished above them.

One by one, however, the American tanks with their 75 mm. guns were reducing these pillboxes, and the American artillery from the farther side of the river was flattening the barracks just north of Cassino, which appeared to be the principal German stronghold. The Germans were not at this time fighting with quite the fanaticism which they were to show later. They had a Division largely composed of Austrians in this sector and a number of prisoners were brought in fairly easily. It was the self-propelled guns which just tipped the balance against the attackers.

I have referred to these guns earlier. They had a calibre slightly larger than that of the Sherman tank guns and, emerging from their concealed positions on the hillside, they continually held up the advance. The American infantry went forward with splendid resolution; their artillery kept up a bombardment of the German positions; their tanks worked hard on one pill-box after another, and appeared to be gradually eliminating them. I have seen no operation which reflected credit upon American courage or upon the skilful combination of their arms. I believe that in this battle artillery, tanks and infantry were all used to the best advantage and in the best possible combination of rôles that the circumstances permitted. They deserved to win Cassino, and in those days at the turn of the month they came very near to doing so.

It seemed that the Germans were thinning out in the familiar way in face of the attack and were contemplating leaving only a weak rearguard to cover the retreat of the army to its next position. There was one period when there appeared to be no more than a single self-propelled gun barring the way into Cassino. Time after time the artillery believed they had knocked it out, but whenever the infantry began to go forward on the narrow front between the river and the mountain in the direction of the town the gun opened up again and wiped out their forward troops at close range.

That went on all through the Monday and Tuesday.

It was on Wednesday, February 2, that we began to get evidence that the Germans had changed their plan of thinning out preparatory to withdrawal. On or before that date they clearly came to the conclusion that the breach in the Gustav line was not fatal and that Cassino could after all be held. New troops began to be brought in from the rear, including the famous First Parachute Division, who had had valuable if costly experience of street fighting in Ortona. The decision was taken to hold Cassino at all costs.

The following day American troops began to penetrate into the town from the north. They were operating on a narrow front, for on their left lay the boggy lentil-soup water-meadows, to the right the steep slopes of Monte Cairo. The attack was by this time following quite a regular rhythm. The first phase consisted of a prolonged artillery bombardment by the American guns, trying to pinpoint the enemy defensive positions. Throughout this period the German gunners would hold their fire in order to avoid drawing attention to their location. In phase two the infantry would go forward towards the town with close supporting fire from their own tanks. Then the German gunners, hitherto so silent, would open up against the attackers. In the final phase the infantry would either be compelled to withdraw or would entrench themselves precariously two or three hundred yards nearer to the enemy. When it was clear that the attack had been halted the artillery would take up the running and the same ghastly rhythm would be repeated.

That went on all through the first dark, foggy week of February. And all the while men were dying. But the attackers

were dying in greater numbers than the defenders. It was becoming clear that the focal point of the battle was not so much Cassino as the Abbey immediately dominating it. The Germans were believed to have troops, or at any rate an observation post, in the Abbey, directing the fire of their guns. As day followed day in February with mounting losses and decreasing gains, it became abundantly clear that the Abbey hill and the Abbey building constituted the real key to Cassino.

On the night of February 4 American patrols got into the town of Cassino, and this operation was repeated upon several occasions subsequently. It was a heroic military gesture, but it made no difference. The troops could not be maintained there by daylight, and in their exposed position they were hopelessly vulnerable to enemy fire. Efforts were made to secure positions in the hills, and American infantry pushed far up in the direction of the Abbey, but it was clear that the Germans were now in considerable strength on these dominating heights and that an entirely fresh effort would be necessary to dislodge them.

And so, about February 4, the attack of the Thirty-Fourth Division died down. It had achieved some important early gains, but Cassino had not fallen and the troops had fought themselves to a standstill.

### *The Second Battle.*

The Abbey was now seen as the focal point. It was believed to be held in strength by the Germans, and plans were made for an air bombardment which was to destroy the building, followed up by an infantry assault with fresh troops hitherto uncommitted.

For this purpose two of the best Divisions of Eighth Army, the Fourth Indian and the Second New Zealand, were brought across from the stagnation of the Adriatic coast. The plan was to employ the Indians to work their way along the hills from the north and seize the final spur of Monastery Hill. Meanwhile the New Zealanders were to attack, not along the road into Cassino, but along the railway track which runs parallel to it about half a mile to the south. It was hoped that they would be able to get across the river, seize Cassino station and subsequently link up behind the town with the Indians from the hills.

Indians on the hills, New Zealanders in the plain, between them pinching out Cassino from the rear and clearing the way for the subsequent advance through the more open country beyond. It seemed a good plan, and we knew that the troops were good.

But from the first it proved ill-starred. Having determined that it was necessary for military reasons to bomb the Abbey, there is no doubt that the Allies should have gone about the business as soon as their preparations were ready. Meanwhile they should have held their tongues about their intentions.

Not a bit of it! Day after day the fullest publicity was given to the pros and cons of the bombing. It was widely discussed in press and radio. There was a good deal to be said on either side of the case, and publicists in Britain and America saw to it that nothing was left unsaid. Was the building being used as a German observation post? Were there strong German forces established there? How many Italian civilians, refugees from Cassino town, were being housed there? What would be the reactions of the Catholic Church? What were the claims of "culture" against military expediency? Every aspect of the case was well and truly thrashed out. There was only one aspect that seemed to worry no one. That was the wisdom of airing our intentions so fully for the benefit of the German High Command.

Statements were made on and off the record on both sides of the Atlantic. We learned that it was a political issue. Then we learned that it was a military issue. If the commanders on the spot regarded the bombing as essential for military purposes they would be supported by the Governments of Great Britain and the United States. This passed the buck to General Alexander and General Clark. But already the decision had been taken, and this unfortunate publicity which was given to the issue in the days before the bombing, while it was aimed presumably merely at preparing world opinion, served the purpose of preparing the German General Staff.

The exodus of civilians from the town of Cassino to the Abbey above had begun about mid-January with the advance of the American troops, and in the month that followed about two thousand five hundred or three thousand persons had taken

refuge there, though some had been passed on by the German military authorities. Certainly there were still several hundred in the Abbey at the time of the bombing.

The refugees had been confined to the ground floor of the building and were strictly forbidden to show themselves on the eastern ramparts—those which faced towards the Allied lines. This was a reasonable prohibition, as they might have taken the opportunity of signalling messages to our troops, while the mere appearance of civilians on or around the walls might lead them to be mistaken for German soldiers and draw down fire upon the Abbey. Whether there were any German troops actually quartered in the building itself is doubtful. All that the civilians knew for certain was that a German medical officer had paid periodical visits to the building for the purpose of examining the civilian sick. That the Germans used the Abbey as an observation post has never, I think, been entirely substantiated, and I do not think personally that at any time they held strong forces in the building itself. This, however, is not really relevant to the issue. The destruction of a building by bombardment, if it can be justified at all on military grounds, obviously can be justified by the fact that the enemy *may* employ it in the future for military purposes even if they have not already done so. I do not myself feel that it was essential that German troops or German artillery observers should have been proved to have been in the Abbey.

On Monday, February 14, Allied planes flew over Cassino Abbey, dropping leaflets addressed to the civilian refugees. These leaflets warned them to leave the building and its neighbourhood as speedily as possible, since the Allies could no longer undertake to spare it. This was a humane if not very intelligent attempt to spare the refugees the horrors of the air attack. At first it appeared that the Germans were going to co-operate to the extent of evacuating all non-combatants. A German officer arrived in the course of the evening with instructions that all civilians were to be ready to evacuate the building by six o'clock on the following morning.

During the night, however, fresh and evil councils prevailed. It was too much to suppose that the enemy would miss the opportunity gratuitously presented to them by the Allied warn-



ing. If the Abbey was to be bombed, the German Command would see to it not only that their own troops were withdrawn to a secure distance, but also that there should be civilian victims. The Allies had shown themselves nervous, had they, about the effect upon world opinion of the deliberate slaughter of civilian refugees? The German Command would take pains to ensure that those fears were justified. They would see to it that plenty of civilians were there to be killed.

And so, before dawn on Tuesday morning, a fresh decision had been taken, or rather, the humane intentions of the local German Commander had been over-ruled. The Abbot was informed that no civilian would be allowed to leave the building. No reason was given for this change, but guards armed with machine-guns were stationed at points commanding the exits from the Abbey. This was subsequently asserted by those civilians who did succeed in breaking our during the course of the bombardment and making their way through to our lines.

In the cold blue on that late winter morning—it was between nine and ten o'clock—a formation of Flying Fortresses passed overhead above the battered villages of San Pietro, San Vittore and Cervaro where now the Indian troops were assembling for the attack. They flew in perfect formation with that arrogant dignity which distinguishes bomber aircraft as they set out upon a sortie. As they passed over the crest of Monastery Hill small jets of flame and spatters of black earth leaped into the air from the summit. Then a deep cloud of smoke enveloped the whole crest.

A series of thuds followed quickly, one upon another, as the planes turned and made their way for home. For the bombing of Cassino Abbey had begun.

For five hours I stood on the hillside of Cervaro, where I had passed so much of the winter gazing across to the promised land beyond the Rapido, and at intervals throughout the morning one formation of bombers after another carried on the work.

Yet the bombing of a single building, even a large one, is no easy matter. Though nearly three hundred planes passed over the mountain, I do not suppose that one bomb in ten scored anything like a direct hit on the building. As the sun

brightened and climbed up the sky I could detect little modification in its outline as each successive smoke cloud cleared away. Here and there one noted an ugly fissure in the walls, here and there a window seemed unnaturally enlarged. The roof was beginning to look curiously jagged and uneven. It was as though some vast malevolent giant had poured a sackful of rocks upon it, but essentially the building was still standing after four hours of pounding from the air.

Just before two o'clock in the afternoon a formation of Mitchells passed over. They dipped slightly. A moment later a bright flame, such as a giant might have produced by striking titantic matches on the mountain-side, spurted swiftly upwards at half a dozen points. Then a pillar of smoke five hundred feet high broke upwards into the blue. For nearly five minutes it hung around the building, thinning gradually upwards into strange, evil-looking arabesques such as Aubrey Beardsley at his most decadent which is also his most attractive, might have designed as a decoration for the Yellow Book.

Then the column paled and melted. The Abbey became visible again.

Its whole outline had changed. The west wall had totally collapsed, and the whole side of the building along a length of about a hundred yards had simply caved in. It lay open to the attacker. It looked as though the infantry could go ahead and storm their way in.

But now follows the greatest tragedy of the whole operation. It seems incredible that liaison between the army and the air forces should have been at fault on this matter. But apparently they were, and the necessity of a swift follow-up by the ground troops does not appear to have been recognised. For the plain fact is that *the infantry were not ready to go into action*. They had been brought rapidly across the width of Italy, they had had to take up new and difficult mountain positions, they could be supplied only by jeep or by carriers going on foot across the hills. Everything turned upon the Indian attack across the ridges of Monte Cairo being made with sufficient punch to carry them on to Monastery Hill. The attack must be made in strength and with adequate munitionment. And on February 14 the final disposition had not been taken up.

Then why was the bombing prematurely launched? The reason is even yet not fully apparent. In part, it was due to a fear that the Germans would strengthen up their defences on the hill if the much discussed bombing were delayed any longer; in part, there was clearly a failure to appreciate the inter-connection between the ground and air operation. It was assumed that Cassino Abbey would lose all, or nearly all, its military significance once it had been destroyed by bombing. In fact this was not the case. Despite the three hundred bombers it was not by any means flattened. It remained a good observation post, and the ruins proved more than adequate to provide cover for machine-gunners. It is easier to storm a building whose walls are largely shattered than an intact one—but not much easier, if the defenders are resolute and courageous.

Cassino was bombed again on the following day, though the attack was on a smaller scale and did not significantly affect the position on the hill. But it was not until the early hours of Friday morning, nearly three days after the first bombing, that the infantry attack was launched. By then the Germans had been given plenty of time to make dispositions on the slopes.

The artillery started in at nine o'clock on Thursday night. For five hours they poured shells down into the German positions, at the rate of ten thousand an hour or one hundred and seventy a minute. And most of those shells were just so much waste of metal and explosive. They produced a great deal of sound and fury, and they displaced a great deal of earth upon the hillside. They must presumably have killed some Germans and knocked out some guns, but in view of the meagre results that followed the bombardment seemed about as militarily significant as a display of fireworks. The bulk of the German forces seemed to have been too deeply dug in to be affected. Moreover, they had employed their time very profitably in sowing minefields upon the hillside, and for these we had no remedy. It was hoped that the Indians would rush the hill within the first hour or two of the attack. But the benefits of speed had already been sacrificed by the disastrous delay after the bombing of the Abbey.

It was bitterly cold when the infantry began to go forward

at moonrise, two hours after midnight. They found the ground thickly sown with the vicious little shoe-mines which blow off a man's foot. One after another the Indians went down on the hillside before they could even get to grips with the defenders. Two false crests were carried by storm, but all the time the attackers were thinning out under enemy mortar fire from the neighbourhood of the Abbey, and it was soon clear that the forward spearhead was going to be too weak to seize and hold the summit. A few Ghurkas actually rushed the Abbey ruins, and I believe three or four of them even came back to tell the tale. For the rest, the Indians were uncomfortably pinned down in exposed positions under direct observation from the Monastery. Within a few hours one of the finest Divisions had been almost cut to pieces.

So much for the attack through the mountains. Nor was the assault by the New Zealanders across the plain any more successful. It had been timed to coincide with the opening of the bombardment. To some extent the clamour of gunfire drowned the sound of the advance, and the troops got some distance without opposition.

The advance followed the line of the railway embankment which was raised slightly above the level of the water-logged meadows on either side. Here again, mines were the difficulty. They had been liberally sprinkled along the route, and the mine-detectors proved useless as they were attracted by the metal of the rails. Finally the infantry had to get down to the job of tearing up the rails with the assistance of bulldozers.

A painful half-mile was gained, the principal tributary of the Rapido was bridged, and Cassino Station was captured. And that was all. The next day the Germans counter-attacked. They re-took the station from the New Zealanders, and on the hills they re-took one of the two spurs that had been stormed by the Indians.

It was a singularly lean harvest. A mile or two had been gained on the mountains, and rather less in the valley. A single spur in one place, a bridge over a rivulet in another. One Division had been almost cut to pieces, another had suffered serious losses. Five thousand shells had been shot away in the preliminary bombardment. For all the assistance they had

been to the infantry they might almost as well have been emptied straight off the ships into the blue waters of the Bay of Naples a few miles away. We were more firmly stuck than ever.

The sole gratifying feature about the second Battle of Cassino, apart from the courage of the soldiers fighting under peculiarly depressing conditions, is to be found in the rapidity with which General Alexander decided to cut his losses and break off the battle when he failed to achieve his objective in the first forty-eight hours. The air bombardment had opened on Tuesday morning. The infantry had gone in between Thursday night and Friday morning. By the end of the week it was all over. With the Germans counter-attacking vigorously in both sectors there was no reasonable prospect of success if we persisted with the operation. The decision to break off the battle undoubtedly saved many lives which would otherwise have been quite uselessly squandered.

Then the rains came down not with quite the hopeless persistency of the previous November, but with sufficient frequency to inhibit all important air activity. For the air was to be the trump card of the next assault. The air attack on the Abbey had failed to produce the expected results, therefore the number of bombers and the weight of the bomb-load must be increased. When the skies cleared they would attack again in the same sector. The sledge-hammer must be larger this time. Like the plagues of Egypt our assaults upon Cassino were to gather in intensity until Pharaoh-Kesselring saw fit to yield. But for the next attack we needed the combination of a clear sky and dry firm ground. A clear sky for the bombers, dry ground for the troops. But an Italian spring, Browning or no Browning, is not so different from spring in other parts of Europe. Three weeks and more passed by, with now and then two fine days in succession but never three. And so we waited and kicked our heels as the evenings lengthened. The Hounds of Spring might indeed be upon Winter's traces, but the lisp of leaves and ripple of rain continued to be most damnably in evidence.

*The Third Battle.*

The morning of March 15 dawned clear and bright as the first wave of the Allied bombers began to take off for what was to be the most concentrated air attack upon a single target in the history of warfare. This time over five hundred planes were to be employed. The object was the total destruction of Cassino town. Every house and building which formed part of this fortress of stone and concrete was to be systematically reduced to rubble. The entire bomber force of the Mediterranean air command was available for the purpose.

After the bombers had done their job, the artillery would promptly lay down a curtain of fire, and behind this creeping barrage the New Zealand Corps would advance directly into the town from the north, where the American attempt had been made nearly two months earlier. It seemed inconceivable that resistance could be formidable in Cassino itself, and it was hoped that the New Zealanders would pass swiftly through and, having secured the crossings of the Rapido, would continue along Route Six, while further forces worked their way down through the hills to the rear of Monte Cairo. Meanwhile the fine Seventy-Eighth Division, which had been inactive on the Adriatic front since December, had been brought across to serve as the pursuit force. They were to be passed rapidly over the crossing made by the New Zealanders and then, fanning out to the south, would take the Rapido defences further south in the rear. They would then aim at keeping the enemy on the move and preventing him from coming to a halt and consolidating upon his next line, the Adolf Hitler.

Under conditions of great secrecy Eighth Army Headquarters had been shifted across to the Cassino area, and the whole of the Adriatic sector was left in charge of what was merely a token force. It was a safe enough move since nothing of importance could happen there.

It gladdened everyone's heart to see the old Crusader badges of the desert appearing once more in an active rôle after their long and dreary winter in a strategic cul-de-sac on the east coast of Italy. The New Zealanders and Seventy-Eighth were

by common repute regarded as the finest Divisions of the old Eighth and First Armies of Africa days. They were now united for the sternest trial in their experience. It seemed a good omen, and we felt that the weight of bomb and fire-power that was being given to them would ensure victory at last.

Once more I drove to the hillside at Cervaro, bumping along in my jeep in the grey dawn through villages whose every ruin I could memorise with closed eyes.

I don't think one worried much about the familiar monotony of the journey that morning. One had left the winter behind, and in "the air now soft with a summer to be" anything seemed possible. This time we should take Cassino, and although we did not know when we should reach Rome the long struggle of the Winter Line would be finally and victoriously resolved. In my own case I knew that there was only a week or two more before I left Italy, for I was going home to cover the Second Front for my paper. Every one of my colleagues destined for this assignment had already left, the very last of them a couple of weeks earlier. Of all pressmen who had been in Sicily, I alone was left. Even so, I should not now "get" Rome; but I should have the not altogether barren satisfaction of wandering through Cassino's streets ("*Iuvat ire et Dorica castra*," etc.), and climbing the winding path that led to the Abbey. It was all the consummation that I wanted. Then a swift aeroplane, a few weeks of an English spring, and finally whatever fate the French beaches had in store. But for me personally Cassino would be the emotional climax. And we were going to win.

The morning chill was already passing from the air when I saw the first wave of planes, silver grey against the serene, dispassionate blue of the sky, perhaps ten thousand feet up, pursuing their majestic journey towards the town. They passed overhead; they dipped. Through my glasses I picked out the bombs, tiny black specks like Lilliputian eggs. They seemed to take a surprising time to fall. Sprout after sprout of black smoke leapt from the earth and from the town itself, joined one with another and curled slowly upward like some dark forest of evil fantasy until three-quarters of the town was obscured in a widening and deepening smudge.

They were attacking with a far greater intensity than on the occasion of the bombing of the Abbey a month earlier. One wave had no sooner started on its return journey than its successor appeared over the eastern skyline. Sometimes they flew in formations of eighteen, sometimes of thirty-six. Sometimes it was the heavies, Fortresses and Liberators; sometimes the mediums, Bostons and Mitchells.

Again and again I saw them turn and dip; again and again I watched that darkly evil smudge rise and spread over the town. I tried to imagine what it must be like for the German garrison. The enemy was strangely, horribly silent and very eerie it seemed. A little half-hearted ack-ack had greeted the first wave or two. Then we heard it no more. Presumably the guns had been silenced and the gunners killed. Once or twice a Messerschmitt attempted to interpose. But it was just hit-and-run stuff, and we didn't lose more than a single plane to them in the whole day.

I remember no spectacle in war so gigantically one-sided. Above the beautiful, arrogant, silver-grey monsters performing their mission with what looked from below like a spirit of utter detachment; below, the silent town, suffering all this in complete passivity. It was a horrible vision of the potentialities of mechanised war, the more so from the absence of any visible opposition. Standing on the Cervaro hillside in the pleasant spring sunshine in the most perfect safety it was easy to feel compunction about this use of air power. My sympathies were wandering guiltily out of the straight, and more than once I had to jerk them sharply back with memories of Guernica and Warsaw and Rotterdam and London. But my sympathies continued to stray. For the men within the town must be very brave indeed. There had been no sign of a white flag. Perhaps they had already abandoned the town. Perhaps all those who remained were dead.

There was no sign of life from the town after that first pathetic spatter of fire.

In three hours fourteen hundred tons of bombs were dropped upon an area not appreciably larger than a single square mile.

That at any rate was the plan. But in execution it wavered. Much too high a proportion of bombs fell far from the target



area. One load flattened out the caravan of General Leese, the Eighth Army commander, who was watching the bombing from Cervaro Hill, a full three miles away from Cassino. Worse still occurred when an entire formation of heavies, mistaking their route, deposited their bombload upon the town of Venafro, which was then the headquarters of a French Corps. Venafro from the air bears a certain resemblance to Cassino. They are towns of much the same size, a mountain wall rises behind each, and a river flows at the base of each mountain. But the towns are a dozen miles apart, and what was more remarkable was the fact that this formation had originally passed right over Cassino itself, had failed to identify the town and *then*, turning with its load still undischarged, had gone back to seek another target.

By noon Cassino (which is about the size of Southborough in Kent) looked as though a heavy, very blunt, jagged-edged knife had been passed across it some four or five feet from the ground. The bombing ceased then, but only to give place to artillery. A pandemonium of noise, a continuous din, not the periodical thud-thud of the bombs, broke loose from the hundreds of guns that had been gathered for the purpose of giving the infantry adequate covering fire while they went in to complete the work. It began to reduce to rubble and small, fine dust whatever had been left by the bombers. But it would soon all be over, and we should rejoice at seeing the Doric camp.

Then for eight days they fought in the ruins of Cassino.

The infantry had gone ahead into the town as soon as the barrage rolled forward. It seemed that nothing could still be living in the place after that air bombardment, and that artillery fire. But the New Zealanders went forward methodically and circumspectly, for they knew and respected their enemy. The barrage continued to lengthen and a curtain of smoke was laid down to cover each fresh bound forward.

From cellars beneath the ruined houses those same Germans who had endured the bombardment began to emerge and to engage our men with a fierce counter-fire.

It seemed to make nonsense of all theories of the effect of intensified bombardment over a small area. It hadn't seemed

possible that anyone could remain alive or sane in that town. But they were alive, they were sane, and they were fighting back with spandau and grenade with all the murderous precision of old.

And meanwhile from behind the shoulder of Monastery Hill, from beyond the Rapido, the German six-barrelled Nebelwerfer mortars were pumping shells down on to the route of our advance.

It was not house-to-house fighting, for there was scarcely a house left even partially standing. Instead they fought from one pile of rubble to another, for each pile concealed a machine-gunner. These young German parachutists knew their job. They had to die in and for Cassino. It was the same unit that the Canadians had met in the Christmas street fighting in Ortona. For sheer dogged fanaticism I know of no finer Division in the world. I wish it were not necessary for me to say that. I loathe their doctrines and the evil god which they serve, but their resolute courage in defence of that Golgotha leaves one reluctantly spellbound. I saw some of them during the next few days when they were brought into our prisoner-of-war cages—some, but not many, for these troops did not surrender frequently. They really did prefer to die for their crooked cross.

They all knew they were going to be interrogated about the effects of our bombing, and they had their cue ready. Almost all shrugged their shoulders and said they didn't think much of it. They "had not been impressed."

Some of these Paratroopers were the old familiar thug type, heroes of many a beating-up of timid, elderly men who happened to be democrats or communists or Jews. What a pity that life will not conform to the old schoolroom maxim that the bully is always a coward. Others were hardly more than chubby-cheeked, fresh-faced boys. That was the pity of it.

The infantry were to have been followed up by tanks giving close support fire, but—and here lay the rub—the streets of Cassino were so littered with piles of shattered masonry that it proved almost impossible to get tanks along. By a supreme irony the great air bombardment had provided a formidable anti-tank obstacle for our own army.

Only two of our tanks did, I believe, get into Cassino in the course of that crucial day. It ought to have been a dozen.

And then the rain came down. It had been reckoned that the long wet spell was at an end, and the attack had in fact been postponed until such time as the fine weather seemed really to have begun. But the rain obligingly played Kesselring's game during the third battle of Cassino. Certainly those Paratroopers deserved some luck.

All the same, I don't regard the rain as a vital factor in our failure. It rendered the condition of the troops far out on the bare mountain side trebly unpleasant and put a greater strain than ever upon those exposed to the cratered blackness of night in Cassino. It made the task of supply more difficult. I am not prepared to say that it turned the balance.

The New Zealanders cleared about two-thirds of the town before dark on that first day and captured the castle that stands on a low, cone-shaped hill immediately behind. The Indians were working their way from spur to spur towards the crest of Monastery Hill. Even next morning after the rain it still looked as though the job was really going to be completed this time.

Each day our men fought on through Cassino and on the mountain above, gaining nearly always just a little bit more ground each time; but the final goal of phase one of the attack—the complete clearing of the town and the capture of Monastery Hill—continued to elude them.

Sometimes the Germans infiltrated back in the night into positions which had been cleared during the day. Sometimes they counter-attacked and re-took points from which they had been driven. Had the town fallen? It was difficult to tell during those days. When does a town "fall"? Is it when the first attacking soldier penetrates to the centre? Or when the last defending sniper has been cleared from the last roof or cellar? No one quite knows the answer, and that is why Cassino was so often reported to have fallen at this time.

Sometimes the noise of small-arms fire in the town died away completely, and one was deluded into thinking that now at last the place had really been cleared. But it always broke out again. On some days our shellbursts on the hillside broke

so closely and so continuously around the summit that they ringed round the Abbey—what remained of it—with a continuous circlet which, seen from a distance, appeared as pleasing and as harmless as a garland of cotton wool. At such times one would believe that the final attack on the crest was about to go in. But the puffs faded. There would be an interval disturbed by the distant rattle of fire far up on the hillside, and when the cotton-wool reappeared it was in much the same place as before—or a little lower down. That meant that the Abbey had not yet been stormed.

It was becoming more and more difficult to supply the Indian troops on the mountain-side. Supply columns could not reach them by day. Those who attempted to do so were picked off with terrible ease by enemy snipers. By night such columns were as likely as not to stumble into hostile outposts. For the Germans had infiltrated along gulleys behind the spurs held by the Ghurkas close under the crest.

On Saturday morning little red specks began to appear in the sky above Monastery Hill, red specks that drifted slowly downwards to alight at widely-scattered points on the slopes. That continued all day, for we had begun to supply the outlying troops on the mountain by parachute.

Supply by air is always by way of being a gesture of despair. You cannot obtain much precision in parachute droppings, and it is particularly tricky in hilly country where a slight error may land the invaluable canisters of food or water or ammunition just on the wrong side of a ridge. It is usually reckoned to have been a good drop if twenty per cent. of the supplies reach the men they are intended for, and calculations are based on that assumption. On Monte Cairo I doubt whether the figure amounted to ten per cent.

While the Indians on the hills were gradually being worn down and running short of ammunition the battle in the town reached its climax over the week-end.

The Continental Hotel, at the southern end of Cassino, may once have been a pleasant, unpretentious little hostelry for the occasional sightseer on a visit to the Abbey, who might choose to spend a night in the town rather than push on to the more sophisticated attractions of Naples. The final desperate re

sistance of the Germans crystallised around the ruins of this building, the Thermopylæ of the First Parachute Division. We had now succeeded in throwing a Bailey bridge over the Rapido where Highway Six crosses the river. (The original bridge had, of course, been destroyed by the enemy months earlier.) Tanks were being passed into the town from the west by a route that avoided much of the rubble that had delayed their progress when they attempted to enter from the north. But a couple of German tanks, partially concealed behind the ruined walls of the hotel kept up the fight. Apart from those two machines, the Germans had been almost entirely driven from the town. But, try as they could, our gunners were unable to silence these last two armoured survivors. Perhaps it was merely their skill in constantly shifting position; perhaps they repeatedly slipped back into caves in the hillside. I do not know. But they were gradually picking off our own tanks and killing our infantrymen.

The road to Rome, Highway Six, runs straight as a bar of steel for the last three miles into Cassino. For a couple of months that final stretch had been a no-man's land. Neither side had even done much in the way of putting patrols into it. Now it had passed into our undisputed possession as far as the bridge.

One afternoon during the very height of the battle I started to walk down that open and deserted road. (If you know you are going to be under fire it is better to walk than to take a jeep.) The houses behind me had been rent and shattered in the earlier battles. The houses in Cassino ahead of me had ceased to exist. But here in no-man's land neither side had troubled to bomb or shell. And the houses were intact, but deserted. They were good, solidly-built two-story houses. A day or two earlier I had gone into one of them and found a table set with plates and cutlery and wine-glasses for a meal which had never been served. The owners had departed in haste and no one had been there during all these weeks until I wandered casually in. I found this phantom dining-room rather terrifying.

I walked on down the deserted road, picking my way carefully along the verge under cover of the hedge. I did not know

whether the verge had been cleared of mines, but it seemed less dangerous than keeping to the exposed highway. Ahead, just a mile away, Cassino was completely invisible, shrouded in dense smoke. The noise of gunfire and of explosions was *continuous*. That was what made it unique among all engagements I had witnessed since Alamein. There was absolutely no cessation. It was Tennyson's death of Arthur.

"So all day long the roar of battle rolled among the mountains. . . ."

As applied to the martial activities of King Arthur and his knights this statement was just a plain, unimaginative lie, artistically as well as factually untrue. No mediæval battle could have produced the roar that Tennyson suggests. But at Cassino it became literally the truth. The noise was continuous. One could distinguish nearly every weapon of modern war—field-guns of various ranges, tank guns, mortars and machine-guns: they were all there, all firing. The enemy seemed to be pumping back shell for shell. This was very rare. For long we had always greatly overweighted them in shell-power, and in most of the battles in the Peninsula they had usually been content to fire back one shell for every five or six or ten of ours. The fierceness of their present retort was the measure of the urgency of the situation. For this was the climax.

Shell after shell was coming over as I approached the bridge. The long whine, then the abrupt, tremendous slam. Whine—slam; whine—slam; breaking first on one side of the river, then on the other. The German gunners were out to get the bridge.

Three of our tanks passed me, driving straight up the road. Through the open turret-top of each tank I saw the head of the commander. He looked neither to left nor right, just straight forward into the mist and smoke that was Cassino. I blessed the presence of those tanks, felt less lonely for the moment, and silently wished them good luck.

I suppose that within a very few minutes all the men in those tanks were dead. For they were driving straight into the presence of generalised death. Almost none of our tank men came alive out of Cassino that week.

Just short of the bridge I came to a halt. It was not a very

healthy place to stop. No one would choose to pass that way except those who went to kill or be killed. The bridge had been rapidly erected by our engineers during the fighting two or three days earlier. They had been under fire the whole time that they worked. I saw some of their bodies two days dead. Then I saw something else.

It was a wooden signboard, painted black with white lettering. It proclaimed :

GO SLOW

BRIDGE AHEAD

AWAIT SIGNAL BY MILITARY POLICEMAN

Nothing else in sight ; only the blanket of mist and smoke screening and enveloping Cassino. Only the perpetual generalised noise of battle, lifted to a closer intensity by the whine—slam ; whine—slam.

That notice-board was not a grim joke. It was purely and characteristically English. It happened to be the wording that one sees on scores of similar signboards behind the battle area. So why not here ? It would be ready for the day when Cassino would be far behind our lines, when supply columns would roll peacefully forward towards Rome and red-capped military policemen would administer homely rebukes to offenders.

But all that seemed a very long way away at the moment.

"Business as Usual." What is one to make of it ? I suppose it is at once the greatest strength of our people in time of danger, their subtlest snare in prosperity and ease.

I drew off a little from the bridge and sat down to munch a bully-beef sandwich. Seven years of following the wars, from Barcelona to Warsaw, from Athens to Alamein and Tunis had brought me to this misty roadside. Half a mile ahead of me was the ultimate quintessence of war. Half a mile away men were hurling at one another lumps of jagged metal, everything that could tear and rend the living flesh, crush and shatter the bone. Every man in that town, fighting and dying in the

mist, was showing the courage of a Bayard. But they were dying just the same, in one general crucifixion. They were all dying in that mist and smoke just ahead of me.

A wave of total and overwhelming despair swept over me. It was all going to happen again, so many times more. One had to cling hard to the purpose and meaning of it all. One had to steel oneself to recall the shrill hysterical screeching of Hitler, Goering's brutally triumphant smile at Munich, and all the obscene bestialities done in secret in the black night of a concentration camp.

That was why they were dying in Cassino now.

Presently I go up and walked back along the road by which I had come. Every step took me further away from the men who were dying.

After eight days we were beaten. The Indians could not quite make that final bound which would have given them the summit of Monastery Hill. And they could no longer be supplied on the forwars spurs. The New Zealanders could not quite clear that final corner of the town. They were taking heavier losses every day, and such tanks as we sent into the town to support the infantry were destroyed one after another.

The air bombardment had been a failure. It had produced a great deal of spectacular destruction, but it had not broken the morale or the fighting power of the defenders. It had merely destroyed great quantities of masonry. We had attacked with too few troops, using a Brigade to do the work of a Division, and a Division where a Corps was necessary. Such attacks are a false economy. You take your losses and you don't get your objective. If we had been able to employ wave after wave of infantry to follow up and relieve the tired units it might have tipped the scales. As it was, we had staked high but just not high enough.

And as the days lengthened and the spring sun warmed the air with April enchantment, the front sank into a complete stagnation. Rome seemed further off than ever.



## XVIII.

## Glorious Summer

HIGH spring had come. Every day the sun shone down out of a cloudless blue, melting the snows upon the Apennines, sucking up the moisture from the valleys, baking the roads to a firm, if uneven, crust, and stealthily lowering the level of the rivers. It was attackers' weather.

But the situation did not look particularly auspicious from the point of view of General Alexander and the forces under his command. Sooner or later he must again attack, if only for the secondary reason of pinning down German Divisions in Italy and preventing them from being withdrawn to face the now imminent offensive in the west. For that reason Alexander could not afford a build-up period of indefinite length. The landings in France were timed to take place in the first week of June. Some time in May the new Italian offensive, if it was to prove an effective diversion, must get under way.

Just as there was an inexorable limit in time, so also considerations of space hampered the Allied commander. On the map his front line, the beach-head included, was well over one hundred miles in length. But the opportunities which it provided for effective assault were few. There was no future in an offensive up the Adriatic coast. That had been abundantly proved by the sterile victory of the Eighth Army on the Sangro in the previous December. The country was merely a succession of mountain ridges and river valleys, each forming a natural defensive position. In December there had been ambitious ideas of swinging round from Pescara through the high Apennines and coming down upon Rome from the east. We knew better now, after a winter of mountain fighting.

*A fortiori* nothing could be done through the central Apennines. That was an area held lightly by either side. The terrain ruled any important operation right out of the question. Much the same applied to the Garigliano sector near the Mediterranean coast. An advance there might make some ground,

but unsupported by more powerful thrusts elsewhere it could easily be sealed off among the hills.

There remained only the Cassino sector and the Anzio beach-head, the two areas where the Allies had suffered their most severe repulses of the whole campaign. By a process of elimination the commander was condemned once more to contest those blood-stained and ill-omened battlefields.

The Third Battle of Cassino had failed for several reasons, but perhaps most of all because the Allied Command, humanely reluctant to involve their troops in a blood-bath, had committed rather fewer infantry than were warranted by the strength of the position which had to be assaulted. In the familiar phrase, a boy had been sent to do a man's job, and all the weight of the preliminary air bombardment had been inadequate to make up for the sheer lack of man-power. Therefore, if we were to attack again, we must flood the ground with troops. It would save lives in the long run. That was the decision communicated to me by Major-General Sir John Harding, Chief of Staff to General Alexander, just before I left Italy in April.

A day or two before my departure I drove up for the last time to Cervaro hillside and stood looking out once more, a self-conscious Moses upon Mount Nebo, towards the promised land beyond Cassino. Mentally I tried to envisage how this new battle could be fought. I ranged over the whole landscape with my eye from the mountains north of Monte Cairo at the one end to the mountains inside the Garigliano bend at the other. There seemed only one place where an attack could develop with any hope of success. That was the broad open plain, intersected by the Rapido, to the left of Cassino town and Monastery Hill. The American Thirty-Sixth Division had been severely defeated there in January, but to some extent the causes of that defeat lay in poor reconnaissance and faulty execution, not in any insuperable difficulties of terrain. I felt convinced that the crossing of the Rapido must be the first important operation of the new offensive. Then I turned my back upon the view and walked away downhill, trying to put it all out of my mind. For others would take my place in this final offensive and would know the strange looking-glass joy of seeing what Monte Cairo looked like from the reverse side.

And so many of the men who should have shared that experience were dead.

The spring passed by to the rhythm of a constant increase in the volume of supplies moving up Highway Six to the Allied forces. Units were withdrawn from the line, rested, brought up to strength with fresh drafts and fresh equipment, obscurely trained for the operation ahead. And always the convoys of three-ton trucks followed one another in drab and uneventful succession up Highway Six.

Eighth Army had now been brought across from the Adriatic coast and was to be entrusted with the break-through battle, while General Clark's Fifth Army was to operate on the Garigliano and in the beach-head. Although Eighth Army units had taken part in the Second and Third battles of Cassino the scale of the switch-over, which included the transfer of the entire Army Headquarters, was successfully concealed from the Germans. One-half of the front—the inoperative half—was held by little more than two British Divisions. At the southern end was concentrated a force amounting in all to some fourteen Divisions.

The Germans were foxed. They knew that some significant re-groupings were taking place, and throughout April their raiding patrols were particularly active, endeavouring to obtain prisoners for identification purposes. But the fact that they shelled a section of the front taken over by the Canadians with propaganda leaflets written in Urdu suggests that they were not very happy in their guesses. They rightly estimated that we were building up for fresh attacks both at the beach-head and on the main front. But they thought that the attack at Anzio would precede the offensive against the Gustav Line.

It was what the Allied command intended them to think.

And so Kesselring, with some twenty-five Divisions in the whole of Italy, kept as many as ten Divisions available for action against the beach-head, and not more than seven from the mouth of the Garigliano to the Apennines to man the Gustav Line. It was not enough.

The skies were blue and clear, as they normally are in a Mediterranean April, and day after day the British and American planes were busily engaged upon the process known as inter-

diction. It was much less a softening-up of the immediate front—that is not easy in mountainous country—than a long-term long-distance policy of gradually strangling the German powers of resistance by a constant repetition of the hammering of his road and rail communications far up the Italian Peninsula. This was what we had attempted at the time of the Anzio landing, and in the main we had failed on that occasion because the time at our disposal had been too short, because we had not been able to command uniformly fine weather and clear skies, because during the long nights enemy convoys could travel in comparative security, and because we had seriously under-estimated the speed with which the Germans could repair our “cuts.”

But now we had a reasonable sufficiency of time, we had the short nights and the weather that we needed, and above all, perhaps, we could assume with some confidence that the bulk of the German repair squads were bespoke for even more urgent tasks elsewhere.

For during that month of April the railway system of northern France was being very extensively clobbered.

One after another the German railway links with the south snapped as the result of the intensified bombing attacks. Road convoys were practically confined to driving at night, and all along the roads little slot-like holes began to appear (I have since seen thousands of these in France, Holland and western Germany), their location marked by a bundle of straw on a stick, indicating a slit-trench in which convoy drivers could take refuge from our air attacks.

I rate this systematic assault upon the German communications first among the causes of the dramatic change of fortune which characterised the fourth and final battle of Cassino.

The new plan involved an attack at almost every point of the Gustav Line except at Cassino itself. Fourth British and Eighth Indian Division were to force the crossing of the lower Rapido and debouch into the open plain beyond immediately south of Cassino town. But although this country gave them elbow-room for movement beyond the river, they would be overlooked and exposed to fire from Monte Cairo in the north and from the hills in the Garigliano bend to the south. The

trough of plain not more than six miles in breadth would be untenable unless these hills were cleared. Accordingly, while the French Corps under General Juin was given this task in the Garigliano bend, the Poles were to work across the spurs of Monte Cairo, storm Monastery Hill and descend on to Highway Six far to the rear of Cassino. By this means not only would protection be given to the troops in the plain by the storming of the heights, but Cassino itself would be pinched out and there need be no repetition of the holocaust of March.

The battle was to open with an artillery bombardment. In that respect there would be no break with tradition—the tradition of the last war which had been revived at Alamein and repeated before practically every significant offensive battle since that date. It was to be a night bombardment, “the heaviest ever,” heavier at any rate than that of Alamein, but—and this was important—it was to be compressed into a period of some forty minutes along a thirty to forty-mile section of front. The main concentration would be against the enemy guns, for each one of these that was knocked out would represent a step towards making the task of the infantry correspondingly easier.

It was the “heavy hammer” strategy again, but employed this time against an enemy who could no longer apply the same whole-hearted concentration to maintaining his positions. Kesselring knew that he could not hope to draw upon the central strategic reserve. That was going to be needed, every Division of it, in western Europe. And so he must fight his battle with cash in hand, and in the last resort to keep his armies in being he might have to be prepared to evacuate the Gustav Line and Cassino, the Adolf Hitler Line and everything south of Rome, perhaps even more still. The Winter Line had, after all, served its purpose. It *had* held the British and Americans throughout the winter. More than that had never been required of its defenders. If the pressure grew too great it might be better to save the army, or some part of it, by abandoning these positions, even though they now bore for German soldiers the same emotional significance that Ypres had possessed for the British and Verdun for the French in the First World War. In January the Führer had called upon his troops to hold the Gustav

position to the last, and hitherto they had done so. But the conditions now were no longer the conditions of January or February or March.

No sooner had the bombardment ceased than the infantry of the two British Divisions assigned to the Rapido sector moved swiftly forward and began their crossing of the river.

In summer the Rapido is not a formidable torrent. In this area it is no more than seventy feet wide, but it is from four to six feet deep and the current is strong. The two pre-requisites of success were first of all to get as many infantry across as speedily as possible and then to make sure that bridges capable of taking tanks and anti-tank guns were flung across the river in the rear of the infantry.

The timing of the attack helped this plan. The infantry crossed mainly by assault boats in the darkness. Some of these boats were sunk, but by swimming and wading the stream in addition to the more orthodox method of crossing, a large force was pushed beyond the river before the short May night began to give place to a grey misty dawn.

That morning mist helped a great deal in concealing the precise area of our crossings from the enemy. At the same time, to intensify this cloak of invisibility, smoke was employed to "blanket" the German observation posts on the hills. And while this was in progress the sappers were hard at work on the bridges.

Heavy ground mists, artificial smoke, shell-fire and dust—they all combined to produce a blanket of fog lying across the Rapido battlefield screening our men not only from the enemy but also from one another. It helped to make everything just that little bit more "chancey"; it enhanced the element of doubt, which is never absent in battle. But on the balance it certainly favoured our troops more than those of the enemy. For the former were working to a plan. Battalion and company commanders knew more or less where they *ought* to be. But the Germans could only guess at our positions and, lacking precise observation, must shell and mortar blindly into the mist, for in battle it is the attacker who is the creative artist. So long as he retains his impetus and flexibility he is in the favoured position of being able to compel his opponent to

dance to his piping. That is one of the strongest arguments in favour of the offensive in war.

The men of the Eighth Army never lost possession of their bridgehead. The smoke and the morning mists had helped greatly to confuse the enemy, but essentially the reason for the success lay in the fact that Alexander had plenty of troops on the spot for the initial assault; that we got a Bailey bridge down very quickly under cover of which Shermans were rushed across to provide close supporting fire—and close support fire is the secret of a successful river crossing; that our commanders were able to keep relieving the troops engaged with fresh units, one brigade following another in rotation, which was something which we had never been able to achieve in the earlier battles; and, finally to some extent we allowed the enemy to wear himself out in counter-assaults. Get yourself into a favourable position with the first assault—a position, the recapture of which the enemy regards as vital—and then leave the opposing commander to lose the battle for himself. He probably will.

Those were the immediate tactical reasons which enabled us to reverse in May the verdict of the earlier battles on the Rapido.

For six days the fighting was extremely tough, but it never looked like turning the way of the former battles. On those occasions the active front had gradually narrowed and narrowed down to a single focal point, where the defence by a supreme effort had just been successful in holding us. Now, with our superiority in numbers, the frontage of the assault was steadily widening. While the British confirmed their hold in the plain beyond the Rapido, the French in the mountains to the south and the Poles in the mountains to the north were beating their way forward, climbing, crawling and crouching on mountain slopes so inaccessible that the enemy had left them comparatively lightly guarded. Our allies were taking heavy losses in the process, but bit by bit they were clearing the heights and making the enemy position around Cassino more and more untenable. On the coast beyond the Garigliano the Americans were on the move, and the prospect of an assault from the beach-head could not be overlooked by the enemy. Everywhere Kesselring found

himself *accroché*. More and yet more reinforcements were needed on an ever widening front.

The Seventy-First and Forty-Forth German Infantry Divisions (the latter was largely Austrian in personnel) on the Rapido front were beginning to go to pieces. The Ninety-Fourth, further south, was in little better shape. Kesselring put in the Ninetieth Light and the Fifteenth Panzer Grenadiers, inheritors of a famous tradition from African days, units which had again and again been reconstituted with fresh drafts and were no longer up to the old level. More troops were coming down from the north and from the Adriatic coast, but our programme of air intermission slowed down their movements and delayed their arrival. By shifting the Eighth Army almost *in toto* across to the western side of Italy Alexander had "jumped" his opponent, just as he "jumped" him in Tunisia when Fourth Indian Division and Seventh Armoured were swung across from the Eighth Army into the First for the final triumphant assault. Kesselring had to follow suit, and thereafter he was always one move behind his opponent, always unsuccessfully trying to catch up with him.

Those first six days were probably the really decisive days of the battle for Rome. And Alexander won because he followed the precept of—was it General Sherman or Jeb Stuart in the American Civil War? He got "the mostest men there fastest," and having got them there they were relieved in rapid succession. For the British Commander was reverting to the tactics which had won Centuripe and with it sealed the fate of Sicily. He was producing fresh troops out of the bag to face tired men. That is how you do win battles.

By May 17, the break came. The enemy had tried to hold us back with defensive fire—but the original bombardment had knocked out too many of his guns. He had tried violent local counter-attacks with Mark III and Mark IV tanks—but he learned, as we had been painfully learning all through the preceding autumn and winter, how vulnerable the tank is in direct attack on a narrow front against a defender with a sufficiency of infantry anti-tank weapons. And in addition to these our own Shermans were pouring across the bridges in ever-increasing numbers.

And so the Germans began to disengage from the Gustav



Line on the night of May 16. Next morning, as the British swung northward to complete the trap by cutting Highway Six behind Cassino, the enemy were retiring in what order they could back towards the Adolf Hitler Line.

Next day the Poles took Monastery Hill by assault, and the British at last cleared the ruins of Cassino town.

The two strongholds, so long and bitterly contested, were captured almost simultaneously. Kesselring having been forced to abandon the Gustav Line entirely was concerned to extract what remained to him of his crack force, the First Parachute Division, which had held Cassino and Monastery Hill for months. The Divisional headquarters and the artillery were got away, but the timing of the infantry withdrawal was left a little too late and about fifteen hundred prisoners were taken in or around the town. There had been a final shelling through the night of May 17, and when this bombardment died down some time after dawn British officers in forward positions addressed the enemy troops in German by means of loud-speakers. They told them that the position of the defenders of Cassino had become hopeless, and advised them to surrender. This was at about nine o'clock in the morning.

Within a few minutes little clusters of German infantry were beginning to emerge from slit-trenches and shell craters, waving red-cross or white flags. All through the morning this went on intermittently, the process of capture varied only by the occasional sniper's bullet, the customary epilogue to a lost battle. That was how Cassino fell—untidily and rather undramatically. It took about five hours' clearing up the last Germans among the ruins, and even when this was completed there was still the hazardous task of locating and cutting pathways through the minefields which had to be undertaken by the sappers working cautiously among the concealed trip-wires. It was in one of these minefields that the very gallant young Australian War Correspondent, Roderick Macdonald, lost his life.

The Poles had to fight to the last to storm the Abbey, and God knows what grim killings occurred during those last bitter minutes far up among the mists on the hilltop on that Thursday morning. But by ten o'clock it was all over, and the Polish flag was hoisted on the building.

The Abbey had not been entirely destroyed by the February bombing. Its walls of eight-foot thickness had in places resisted the effects of high explosive. More than one of the chapels was found to be almost wholly intact. But the whole of the wall along one side had completely caved in, and where there was not merely an untidy pile of rubble there was a hideously chaotic litter of equipment. Clothing, blankets, ammunition boxes, packs, mortar bombs, grenades, broken rifles, empty and discarded food-tins, it was all there, that sheer, ultimate untidiness and squalor which to me is always the most vivid image of war.

Nowadays the single word "war" increasingly connotes for me not the charging tanks, not the mammoth bombardment, not the steady rhythm of the factories, not even the scattered dead (how curiously impersonal they look!), but the obscene mess of filthy clothes, torn paper and half-consumed noisome food. I wonder whether any war artist has ever done justice to it. It is the picture that I want to see commemorated by painters of romantic battle scenes. In these days, by a happy change of public taste, we are spared such things as the romantic battle picture save in some of the very cheapest and most trivial periodicals. But I am very conscious of the impingement upon my early childhood of those garish acreages of painting in which "the boys in red" huddled in a tightly-packed cluster, rather like an incipient Rugby football scrum, around the flag, enduring the close quarter assaults of the not less picturesque "natives," who were usually Zulus or rebellious Sepoys (the Zulus were the more picturesque), in one final stand beside the inevitably jammed gatling.

How I enjoyed them at the age of six . . . but now . . . I commend the dirty litter of an abandoned battlefield to the artists. Let them set *that* in their painted cloths.

By the rules of "map only" strategy the enemy should now have been in a position to take a breather behind the defences of the Adolf Hitler Line, now hastily re-christened Dora, while we re-grouped for the next attack and in the process lost something of the initiative which we had snatched. That was what some of us who had witnessed the barren and unsuccessful

assaults of the winter most feared. We remembered the way in which one mountain barrier had given place to another, so that every advance of five miles or even less presented us with a fresh natural obstacle which could be held in "Horatian" fashion—three men against three hundred. Could we possibly keep up the impetus of the offensive?

The enemy failed to make good his stand on Adolf Hitler for three reasons. The line was of nothing like the natural strength of the abandoned Gustav position. It ran slap across the plain of the Liri for several miles, and this plain provided more open country than our troops had fought in for many months past.

In open country the odds, already heavily in our favour, were increased because it was the type of country in which our greater numbers of men and the great quantity of tanks which we had available could be effectively employed.

Secondly, the enemy simply had not the gun power adequately to man the pillboxes which had been constructed in the course of the winter and spring. A line may look very pretty on a map; it may bristle with concrete fortifications, but unless there are guns in those emplacements and unless there are shells for the guns it is of extremely little value for defensive purposes.

And finally the Germans, who had disengaged and fought their way back with difficulty to the new line, were in no condition to put up a full-scale resistance. They had taken heavy losses in men and material and they were now becoming morally overwhelmed by the superiority of strength that continued to be thrown against them.

Here is one letter, symptomatic of many, written at this time by a German officer in the mountain front line opposite the French:

*My dear wife,*

*It is impossible to imagine the extent of the difficulties or the horrors of this retreat. We will not let them beat us down, but the boys are tired. They have had nothing to eat for three days.*

*Our Fighting French and Moroccan opponents are remarkably good. My heart bleeds when I look at my poor battalion. After*

## GLORIOUS SUMMER

*five days one hundred and fifty men lost. Three reconnaissance vehicles in ruins, my own tank and all the radio and electrical equipment destroyed by a French tank. Weapons, paper and food have been used up completely.*

*Perhaps we shall manage after all to avoid a complete collapse of the Italian front, but that looks a very dim hope.*

That was the spirit in which the German Army faces the battle for the Adolf Hitler Line.

At last we had open country, such country as General Leese's Eighth Army had not seen since they had crossed the Foggia plain eight months earlier. Artillery and infantry had forced the Gustav Line. Adapting his plan to the changed conditions, General Alexander determined to employ tanks on a very large scale.

Tactically the decision was sound, for the ground favoured their use. It was very far from ideal tank country, for it was a good deal seamed with gulleys and thickly planted with orchards and olive groves. Tank commanders could not hope for a long view, but they could move; they no longer found themselves confined to a few roads winding in and out of the mountains. It was on the whole "movement country," but not "observation country." In addition to this there was a tactical justification for the use of tanks since the enemy had no longer the number of anti-tank guns available that would have broken a head-on frontal attack with armour.

Psychologically, too, the decision was sound. Tanks have a "nerve value" against an opponent whose morale is already shaken, a value which bears little relation to the actual damage which they are capable of doing as compared with, say, field-guns and mortars. It is one of the phenomena of this war, and it is not in any way dispelled by a knowledge of the ease with which tanks can nowadays be knocked out at close quarters by infantry weapons such as the bazooka and the piat.

"The tanks are there!"

"The Campbells are coming!"

"Murat is bearing down on our centre with twenty squadrons of cavalry!"

"Rupert and his Cavaliers are charging at the gallop!"\*

"Pyrrhus is attacking with elephants!"

Those are the phrases that through the generations have expressed the moral importance of *shock* in battle tactics and which have cast a spell over men's minds in the moment of action—unjustified hope on the one hand, unreasoning discouragement on the other. The sight of enemy tanks in great numbers on the field of battle is still awe-inspiring to an infantryman, and I know that the appearance of one's own tanks, even if they do nothing whatever, has a peculiarly reassuring influence. Any soldier will tell you that he "feels better" when his own tanks are visible—though probably he will add that, whenever possible, he avoids getting too close to them because tanks are liable to draw enemy fire against themselves, and anyone who happens to be around is liable to suffer.

Alexander allowed no pause to elapse in front of the Hitler Line. As early as May 19 the First Canadian Division with armour and the Seventy-Eighth Division, two fine battle-experienced units, made contact with the centre of the Line while the enemy flanks were pinned by the Poles, who for a whole week kept up a steady pressure upon the hinge of the position at Piedmonte in the north, and by the French, who stormed their way into the southern end of the line at Pico and held their position against bitter counter-attacks. The French were already deep into the line before the major battle began. By achieving this penetration they drew down a degree of concentration upon themselves which correspondingly relieved the pressure upon the Canadians and the British in the plains.

And now the battle for Rome was reaching a climax, for the last enemy reserves had gone in. Besides those previously committed, Kesselring now rushed up two more battle-scarred

\* I include Prince Rupert although he never won a land battle of any importance. He is a tactical innovator of some significance, for he first introduced the cavalry charge *at the gallop*. Cromwell and other cavalry leaders of his day made their attacks at the trot, stopping to fire their pistols and continue, still at the trot. Rupert's attacks almost always carried the opposing force away by pure shock, but he had not the control over his men that was necessary if they were to be kept together as a coherent force. Those who are interested in this contrast of tactics will find the matter discussed in Clennell Wilkinson's "Prince Rupert the Cavalier."

Divisions, Twenty-Sixth Panzer and Twenty-Ninth Panzer Grenadier. Three Hundred and Fifth came across from the Adriatic and was relieved by another Division (Two Seventy-Eight) from Istria. There was now an incoherent body of nine German Divisions, all below strength, caught up in the maelstrom of the battle, while another four (which was possibly two too many) were left to hold the quiet sector on the Adriatic and in the Apennines. The force around the Anzio beach-head had now been reduced to five Divisions.

It was not enough.

At dawn on Tuesday, May 23, Alexander struck simultaneously with the Eighth Army against the Adolf Hitler Line and with the Fifth Army outwards from the Anzio beach-head.

Several hundred Sherman tanks were massed for the attack by the Canadians and British up the Liri valley. As the morning broke in rain they started to drive forward along the roads, through the orchards, across the meadows.

Kesselring, no less than Alexander, knew that this was the day of decision. Unless he could hold the attack during the next few hours Rome was in all probability lost, for the beach-head offensive threatened to turn his final line along the Alban hills. His best hope, and it was a slim one, was to defeat the Allied attacks in detail. First break the blow on the Liri, then turn to deal with Anzio—that must have been the general pattern of Kesselring's plan at this stage. And so the German armour accepted the challenge. It went forward to meet General Leese's tanks in the Liri plain.

For two days the armour fought it out. It was much the biggest tank encounter of the whole campaign. The Germans were employing against our Shermans their Mark III and Mark IV tanks, the latter of which carries a gun of similar calibre to that of the Sherman, but taken as a whole it is a rather less powerfully armoured tank and rather less effective in battle. They had also a number of the heavy fifty-six-ton Tigers, which mount an 88 mm. gun, much more powerful than the Sherman's 75, but they are less manœuvrable than our tanks. For defending a fixed position the Tiger in a hull-down position is the most nearly invincible tank in existence, but in a battle of move-

ment it is liable to be at a disadvantage through lack of speed and through presenting too conspicuous a target.

The Panther, or Mark V, had been employed on the Russian front and in small numbers at Anzio a month or two earlier. It subsequently won a high reputation for its performances in Normandy. In its combination of striking power, armour and speed it was the best all-round tank in existence throughout 1944, but it does not seem to have been employed in this battle. No doubt the enemy were husbanding this nearly new weapon against the opening of the western front. In addition the Germans had numbers of self-propelled guns, mechanical hermaphrodites combining most of the qualities of tank and anti-tank gun.

To a great extent it was the old-fashioned head-on battle of tank *versus* tank, of the sort scarcely seen in the Mediterranean since Sidi Rezegh two and a half years earlier. Observation was poor on both sides owing to the rain and cloud. Under the circumstances it might have seemed likely to develop into a battle of mathematical attrition tempered by chance. We had a numerical superiority of something like three to one, and that was almost bound to give us the victory.

But a numerical superiority in armour can be more usefully employed than in bulldozing a way to victory by the always costly and usually unintelligent tactics of attrition. The job of the tank is, as a general principle, not to seek out enemy tanks and engage them, but rather to avoid the hard shell of the opposing armour and feel about for the soft flesh behind. When tanks are employed in a mass offensive action (as distinct from their employment in defence or in dribbles to give close support fire to infantry) it should always be with a clear-cut breakthrough in mind.

That happened in the Liri valley. We took our losses, but long before the close of the first day's fighting the British and Canadian tanks had shot their way through the centre of the Hitler Line between Pontecorvo and Aquino and, continuing rapidly ahead, they proceeded to exploit the break on the Wednesday.

And now at last the long-deferred dividend from Anzio was paid. Not in full, for against the success which was now to

be so rapidly achieved must be set the Allied losses and frustration in the weeks of bitter fighting at Cassino. But the thrust, nicely coinciding with the break in the Hitler Line, provided almost the final touch of disintegration to the German troops south of Rome.

Kesselring, with a diminishing number of troops at his disposal and no prospects of receiving more, had been out-manceuvred in his attempts to provide adequately for the needs of both fronts. He had expected the original Allied offensive to open from the beach-head, and he had accordingly kept a disproportionate number of troops immobilised there during the early part of May. When Alexander struck on the Rapido the German commander was compelled gradually to feed more and more troops towards the main front. They arrived piecemeal, they arrived late, they arrived woefully short of transport, which was being shot up on the roads through the lengthening summer days. The forces that might have prevented any debouchement from Anzio were slowly melting away. On the critical May 23 Kesselring committed most of his available armour to the battle on the Liri. He had left himself very little at the beach-head.

The attack from Anzio had the support of naval guns from the Allied warships in the Tyrrhenian Sea and from an air force which was far larger than any that had so far taken part in the offensive. The Germans were shelled from the sea, they were bombed and machine-gunned from the air in addition to the metal that was flying at them from the massed batteries of General Clark's Fifth Army. Under the circumstances the attack, made in comparatively open country with no mountain or river obstacle in front of it, was almost bound to succeed. It headed not north-west in the direction of Rome, but north-east towards Highway Six and the rear of Vietinghoff's retreating and disorganised Tenth German Army.

With both fronts cracking ominously, Kesselring did the only thing that was left to him if he was to save his troops from annihilation. He made no attempt to delay the junction of the beach-head forces with those on the main front, for he had nothing to gain by leaving any troops in the militarily valueless area of the Pontine marshes. And so he began a general with-



drawal on both fronts towards the line of the Alban hills, the last defence of Rome. American troops had taken Terracina on May 24. Early next morning their armoured cars raced forward without opposition for twenty miles along the dead-straight line of the Appian Way and at seven-thirty they made contact with the sappers of the beach-head force at Borgo Grappa five miles east of the Mussolini Canal, which ever since January had formed the front line of the Anzio position.

The attack from the beach-head had been the final and determining factor which decided Kesselring in favour of a complete pull-back through the Frosinone plain to the last line in front of Rome. He could not spare any men from the Anzio sector where the whole of this final position was soon to be gravely embarrassed and was already outflanked by the new attack. He had to disengage as quickly as possible in front of the Eighth Army and the French. The Hermann Goering and the Ninety-Second Infantry Division had arrived on this front less some two to three thousand of their vehicles which had been destroyed or put off the road by air attacks. So far from plugging the line they found themselves caught up in the retreat. There was some fighting for the town of Arce which was held by a rearguard while the remainder of the troops broke off the battle and struggled back northward along the dusty roads, moving now almost wholly by night for the losses by daylight air attack had continued to soar and the risk of traffic blocks during the day had to be avoided.

Then for the next few days it was almost like a hectic repetition of the old advances in North Africa. The enemy were moving and we were keeping them moving. It was a war against demolitions and mines and booby traps all over again, with an occasional brisk rearguard action as a variant. The resistance at Arce was stiff and prolonged, but it was not really significant, for Kesselring's real concern was with the dangerous American thrust to cut Highway Six in the rear of the bulk of his troops and sever the escape route to Rome.

Artena, three miles south of the vital road, was entered by the Americans without opposition as early as May 26. For the moment it began to look as though General Clark's forces

might bag the entire Tenth Army of Vietinghoff—what was left of it. Could the Americans have covered just those last three miles to the "escape Highway" in adequate strength, they might have done the trick. But for the last time in front of Rome the Germans showed their ability to react speedily with an improvised defence against a sudden surprise thrust.

It was the old story—a few self-propelled guns and a handful of infantry with spandaus scraped together and flung into the breach. They proved just adequate for the task, and with a view to the early rushing of Rome, General Clark swung the axis of his offensive west towards the capital rather than east upon the rear of the Tenth Army.

Rome was a tempting prize, and it was arguable that the early seizure of the city might save days of costly street fighting besides preventing incalculable destruction. The Tenth Army was finished, anyhow, and to turn east exposing an uncovered flank towards the direction from which enemy reinforcements might come would involve a grave risk. Balancing the issues, the American commander decided that the early capture of Rome was the more vital immediate objective. He began to build up his strength in Ardena, his most advanced point, north-east of the Alban hills. American friends of mine who were with the Fifth Army at the time have criticised this decision of their General. On the information at my disposal I do not feel that the grounds for criticism can be substantiated.

The Germans stiffened up. They brought in Panther tanks, the first to be used since the Allied offensive had begun. They counter-attacked the Americans and held firmly on to Valmonte on Route Six.

Through vital days the enemy kept open that escape corridor, which was constantly under fire from the American artillery, by the narrowest of margins. The first American force had been in Ardena on May 26, but it was three days before the first of their patrols was able to reach Highway Six, and not until late on June 1 did they succeed in cutting the road three miles east of Valmonte. By that time other detachments fighting further west towards Rome had penetrated into the final bastion of the Alban hills.

After that it was virtually all over. The enemy still pivoted strongly on their western or coastal flank near Anzio, but all along the rest of the front from the Alban hills to the Apennines they were now breaking off contact and getting back through Rome; the decision had been taken to abandon the capital, which was declared an open city by Kesselring, who asked the Vatican to convey the request that it should be treated as such to the Allied commander.

There is little doubt that the Germans could have caused us losses and delayed our advance by endeavouring to hold on in certain sectors of the city, and involved us in street fighting which always tends to be more costly to the attacker than to the defender. But the principal preoccupation at Kesselring's and probably at Hitler's headquarters was to get back as many troops as possible as swiftly as possible to their next defensible line far to the north of Rome. The Führer had written off Rome and central Italy by this time. With the thundercloud of invasion on the very point of bursting over western Europe he was obviously more concerned to conserve his forces in the Mediterranean rather than to commit them to a battle of annihilation which could not now significantly influence the course of the campaign or of the war.

That, I am convinced, was the real reason for the decision to spare Rome. Political considerations had something to do with it, for Hitler still affected to regard Mussolini's Italy as an ally and, in public at any rate, he was in the habit of paying marked attention to that shabbiest of tigers, the ex-Duce. It is arguable, too, that the prospects of sabotage and sniping against the German troops by the citizens of Rome was not to be overlooked. Civilian opposition might not have been formidable, but it would at least have been irksome. The example of Budapest, which was contested block by block for week after week during the coming winter, is enough to show how little consideration Hitler and his commanders had for the capital of a reluctant ally. It is pretty clear that neither political scruples nor fear of civilian resistance would have influenced them if they had considered it to their military advantage to fight through Rome. Luckily, they did not.

And so Herr Hitler, wishing to keep his two armies of

Italy in being, made a virtue of necessity, talked of his love of culture and issued instructions to Kesselring to hasten the withdrawal of the blocked traffic columns through the city.

A little after dawn on Sunday, June 4, a number of American armoured cars and tanks which had broken through the Alban hills, began to penetrate into the south-eastern suburbs of the capital towards the Porta Maggiore. The church bells were ringing throughout the city, providing a bizarre background to the rattle of machine-guns and rifles and the heavy explosions of mortar bombs and anti-tank shells as the German rearguards continued their delaying action.

Cautiously, the advancing cars and tanks began to nose past the Maggiore gateway; cautiously, the inhabitants began to emerge from their cellars. They seemed nervous at first, wondering what would be the attitude of the conquering army. Then the reserve began to melt. They clustered around the troops, pressing wine on them, pelting them with roses.

(Just eighty hours later, on the other side of Europe, I was entering the little Norman town of Bayeux, for it was the early afternoon of D Day plus one of the invasion of France. There, too, I remarked the same preliminary shyness, the same happy relaxation when it was realised in what spirit we came. There, too, it was flowers and wine on that sunny June afternoon. It is well that war should provide these sudden touches of beauty and gaiety. Who is any the worse if the battle chariot does occasionally trail a rose . . . ?)

The advance was halted to give the Germans an opportunity of withdrawing from the further outskirts of the city, and then at eleven o'clock the Allied guns began to shell the retreating enemy columns.

By this time nearly all the German force was through to the northern side of the capital. Spasmodic sniping continued around the Esquiline and right up to the fringe of the Colosseum. Then the more ponderous and formidable columns of Allied armour began to penetrate deeper into the city. A stray German scout-car that had got isolated and cut off from its convoy was located and knocked out a few yards from the Quirinal in front of the Bank of Italy.

Then it was all over, and Rome was free.

The capture of Rome was the real end of the campaign, the real end of the long Mediterranean war. What followed was a postscript, interesting in itself but of decreasing significance to the European struggle as a whole. Rome had been the objective and Rome was won. Nothing could matter to the same extent after that.

It had been a beautifully executed campaign. In twenty-four days the forces under General Alexander's command had shattered the Tenth German Army and the various reinforcements that were successively swept into it from the Fourteenth Army and from the north. They had advanced between seventy and eighty miles, had broken through three defensive lines—Gustav, Adolf Hitler and Alban hills—and had freed the capital of Italy. Twenty thousand prisoners had been taken, a number perhaps smaller than might have been expected in view of the magnitude of the victory. The clearing of all central Italy was now ensured. Those were the fruits of the campaign.

The operation had succeeded not through the employment of any sensational new form of tactics. It succeeded because Alexander was able to employ more men and a greater weight of fire power. He was able to do this partly through getting a move ahead of Kesselring by the secret transfer of the Eighth Army from one side of the peninsula to the other just before the opening of the offensive, partly because of the programme of air attacks upon the enemy lines of communication which was maintained by the Allied Mediterranean Air Forces through the lengthening days and under the clear skies of spring. As a result, while Alexander's build-up proceeded smoothly and in accordance with his plans, Kesselring was always receiving his reinforcements late, frequently short of their scheduled manpower, almost always grievously lacking transport and equipment.

It succeeded because, while recognising certain focal points as being of predominant importance, the Allied commander kept the enemy sufficiently pinned along a wide front and made it impossible for him to reinforce at just those vital points

where we always had just a little to spare. That is the correct use of superiority in man-power. It succeeded because Allied units were not kept in the line until they had been battered out of shape and reduced to a mere hobbling and dispirited fraction of their former strength. Instead, they were rested and relieved in speedy succession. That was a lesson learned from the costly winter battles.

The Mediterranean campaign, as such, was over. For exactly four years this sea and its shores had been the main British theatre of war against the Axis. The handful of troops, commanded by an unknown General called Wavell, precariously garrisoning a few isolated and outlying posts on the western frontier of Egypt and the southern outskirts of the Sudan had grown to a mighty army supported by an unrivalled, and ultimately unchallenged, air striking power and by a navy which had kept the seas through the first three black summers of the Mediterranean war. The armies had cleared Africa; then the navy and the air forces had covered their invasion of Europe.

And now the work was completed on a June morning when, in a score of British ports, the Anglo-American Fleet was about to lift anchor for the great adventure, the great gamble in the West.

Yet always with victory there is an accompanying sense of disappointment. Rome had been so long delayed. Our hopes had been so high in September, but they had died in despair during the long and hard winter battles. It seemed that there was so much that might have been done that autumn. Rome and Florence, or alternatively Valona, Salonika, Athens, Belgrade, had seemed to be within our grasp. But all the roads had led to Cassino.

Now, at last, the victory had arrived. It was good that it should come, for it had been bravely contested and in the end brilliantly achieved. But it had been a long journey, and everyone was very weary. And too many had died.

What epitaph can one write of the Italian war? It closed a long chapter, but it might have been the opening of a fresh and even more brilliant one. I do not know.

C. E. Montague has expressed it all. I cannot better his words:

## ROAD TO ROME

“What a victory it might have been—the real, the Winged Victory, chivalric, whole and unstained! The bride that our generous youth had sought and had not won . . . had come home to us now: an old woman, she no longer refused us.”

THE END





# THE ADVANCE ON ROME

— Lines of successive British Fronts  
 — Lines of successive American Fronts  
 — Direction of Thrusts

